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OF A
HUNDRED FIGHTS.

BOOKS BY SARAH TYTLER.

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A HERO OF A HUNDRED FIGHTS

By SARAH TYTLER

AUTHOR OF "PAPERS FOR THOUGHTFUL GIRLS," "CITOYENNE JACQUELINE,"
"LADY BELL," &c.



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CHAPTER I.

COUNTRY VISITORS ON THE PAINTERS' SHOW-DAY.

CHRISTOPHER HATHERLEY had come up to town with his niece for the Easter holidays, and to make two among the visitors to the studios on the painters' show-days. The pictures were a treat for both uncle and niece, but in different ways.

In the old days, when the world was all before Christopher, and the study of art was a labour of love, he had been a student in the Academy's schools along with some of the middle-aged men now famous.

As for Ellen Hatherley, she was fond of beauty wherever she could find it, and she had a reflected interest in art, having come of a family that were considered culture-loving. Besides, she was firmly persuaded that her uncle Chris was, in his own person, a great painter, though still unknown to fame, but only tarrying to burst late on the world with an immortal achievement.

It was with unsophisticated zeal that the country visitors, with their open *sesame* in the

shape of old acquaintanceship and friendly introductions, pursued their way, employing hansoms regardless of expense in the service, from Fitzroy Square to Kensington, on to Chelsea, away to Hampstead, where some stragglers from the camp had thought fit to pitch their tents.

Marvels awaited the sympathetic critics; marvels in more than pictures. *Such* houses, with deliciously subdued tones in painted walls, severely harmonious hangings, mediæval armour and cabinets, Queen Anne tables and Chippendale chairs, old china and art needlework!

And it was the fête-day of the studios—the special arrangement of which, though well known to Christopher, had all the charm of novelty to his niece. Everything was to-day not only in apple-pie order, but in gala dress. The homely tools of the trade palettes and mahl-sticks, brushes and colours, and working blouses, were put decorously out of sight behind Indian screens and old Mortlake, French, or Flemish tapestry. Nothing was to be seen save finished pictures in chaste or gorgeous frames, holding the place of honour in carefully selected lights, and fitly surrounded by picturesque objects, extending from one art pole to another, from old marbles to peacock fans.

There was even an attempt to overpower the lingering smell of paint by the fragrance of the sweet common spring flowers and the splendid

exotics with which the vestibules and the conservatories adjoining some of the studios were lavishly supplied.

Many of the establishments had men-servants in their Sunday best to wait on the guests. Some artists, who were too diligent or too modest to act as their own showmen, employed a mild species of touter to point out the beauties of their works, and explain the designs, which were not always such as those who ran could read.

The masters of these paradises acted the part of bland and courteous hosts in welcoming the privileged public to the private exhibitions. There might be aches of anxiety, twinges of doubt, and pangs of suspicion in the hearts of those gentlemen smiling so gallantly. They had been at their posts from an early hour. They might have been compelled to see that the great dealers were not propitious. They might have missed some liberal buyers, and been darkly convinced that these had gone over the way to rivals in art.

Mischief-makers might have enlivened themselves by reporting invidious whispers and cynical comments on the performances from some of those very brethren of the brush who were apparently so full of jolly camaraderie and almost boisterous approval.

This was the most trying day of the three hundred and sixty-five to these masters of the ceremonies. As daylight waned, the principal

persons concerned might have the impression that they could not endure the ordeal much longer ; but so long as it lasted they masked their feelings with the greatest success, until a novice like Ellen was tempted to believe this the serenest and happiest of regions.

The very bodily wants of the obliged company were not forgotten. In occasional ante-rooms and corridors stood convenient sofas near tables laden with nectar and ambrosia, in the form of claret and biscuits, sherry and cake, even where the bottles did not contain Burgundy and champagne, and the plates chicken salad, lobster pâtés, and early strawberries at fabulous prices. Hospitable satellites hovered around, considerably begging the public to rest and refresh themselves in the intervals of rushing to and fro in this giddy search after some new thing.

In the estimation of the wearied, excited Ellen, with her healthy country appetite, and her toil and fatigue in working steadily through the opportunities and pleasures of a short visit to town, this last stroke of chivalrous courtesy added considerably to the heavy debt of gratitude which she owed already to these princes of painters. Were they not princes like Rubens and Sir Joshua ? she asked herself in her girlish enthusiasm. What could be grander and more charming than their domains ? What would Aunt Sophy think of the Turkey carpets and velvet portières ?

What would Aunt Anne make of the claret, which was very likely twice as much as eighteen-pence a bottle, and the macaroons, which must at the lowest computation have cost sixpence a bagful, dispensed like cakes and ale? And Aunt Phyllis—oh! what would not Aunt Phyllis give for some of these oak carvings to copy in leather-work, and for the least bit of that crown Derby to put on her last bracket!

Then Ellen thought, with a sudden swift compunction, of Christopher's studio at home—the garret with bare, ghastly whitewashed walls, no furniture save old travelling traps and ugly lumber, lit by skylights which might be good for art purposes—the master said so—but which constituted rude and uncouth objects in themselves, almost as bad as the old laundry grate, and the dingy green-baize screen set up to shelter the worker from the draughts let in by the ill-fitting door.

Uncle Chris must be quick, do his great work, and have rooms like these, which all the Court-field world would flock to gape at and admire. Then they would begin to suspect what a great man and painter had been among them in the person of the quiet, pleasant-spoken gentleman who had drudged so honestly and patiently for many a year, wasting his precious time in going three times a week to teach drawing in Birmingham—of all places in the world—bravely forgetful of

the fact that he had been one of the Hatherleys of the Park.

Ellen had a dim, half-consenting, half-protesting conception of the fact that it needs the stamp of material prosperity to impress all, except the very few, with the presence of genius.

The girl was so dazzled with the setting that, in spite of her connection with art and her general enthusiasm for beauty, she half forgot the pictures, from which Christopher rarely took his eyes. It was such a treat for him to come up from the depths of the country and see in two days the best fruits of the year's work, to divine what schools were coming to the front, to decide on the progress of art in England. He had managed to make an annual run up to the Academy; but his time had been limited, and he had been apt to get a good deal overwhelmed by the bad—though he was wonderfully slow to call work bad—and the mediocre, which jostled and almost swamped the first-rate pictures. As it happened he had not been in town on the show-days, when he could take his choice and go from studio to studio, since he had been a student in the schools, and had himself rented a London studio. Humble enough was that studio compared with the humblest of these, and rented in company with another young painter who had lived to let the world hear of him. They, too, had, in that far-back time, boasted the modest beginning of a show-day.

Christopher Hatherley had seen many changes, with fashion succeeding fashion. The pre-Raphaelites, where were they—unless they survived oddly enough in the lordly isolation of a few confessed followers of the Venetians, who did not think the world worthy of their works? And what was the explanation of these studios giving forth Greek and Roman scenes, with profound and subtle scholarly tones of their own, which excluded especially modern life, and for the most part human passion, from their entire scope? They were becoming still more prominent in art than in literature. Did they point to the inference that all later channels having run dry, the poet and the painter felt the obligation upon them to return to the fountain-head of beauty, to try to reproduce what had been the inspiration of a Sophocles and an Apelles?

Here was another phase of thought and feeling, in which every meadow and wood, garden and old mansion, was seen refined and idealized as under the pale rays of the moon, while it was sought to render the whole landscape and each figure in it pregnant with mystery and passion—until all the matrons seated at bay windows or walking along far-stretching roads represented tragic queens or prophetesses, and all the country girls making hay or hanging out clothes to dry were Egidias or Undines, half nymphs, half oracles, or creatures of dreams, free from responsibility—at the best

capable of dissolving in the spray of a fountain. The founders of the school had painted so exquisitely in their somewhat feverish solemnity and hectic delicacy, that an absence of robustness and realism might readily be forgiven them, but growing affectation and mannerism formed the portion of their followers.

There was still another longing essay at the spirit of the scene in rendering valleys and mountains by the deepest of shadows and the bluest of greens, and in transfusing, by the silveriest of lights and the palest of gold-tinted greys, corn-fields and uplands. The last endeavour was far enough removed from the deadly literalism of topography, and yet Christopher suspected it was but a callow, crude interpretation of the secret of nature after all. But his sympathies were with these workers, while he had nothing better than a cold acknowledgment for the skill in moulding and charm in colouring of much which the world adored. The game there was, in his estimation, either not worth the candle, or worse—disgracefully false and irrelevant, undeserving a rushlight, an altogether mean and mocking travesty of what it was for tortured genius to illuminate.

Thus Christopher, though he paused long with pleasure before what gave simply and sweetly a nest in a hedgerow or a baby's nosegay, a toil-worn man, or a fresh, innocent girl; looked little at mere shows of mountain and wilderness; or

turned his shoulder largely on gorgeous Oriental bazaars and picturesque porches of Italian churches, pleasure-parties and family groups, gentlemen in robes of office, ladies in morning or evening costume, comic or tragic studies from galvanised history or classic stories—around which good judges gathered, entranced with the handling of the foreground or the distance, the grouping of the figures, or the seizing the point of the tale.

Ellen's judgment was not nearly so clear; she was not always certain what she liked and what she disliked. She would have been glad to consult Christopher, but she did not care to disturb him—engrossed as he was by the contemplation of the pictures, or occupied with receiving the greetings of old acquaintances.

One thing startled her. It was the difference which she could not help remarking between those perfectly finished, worked-out pictures and those dim, rather chaotic productions of Uncle Chris's at home—out of which he was to evolve the picture that was to take London by storm and set the Thames on fire at last. Ellen crushed down a fluttering misgiving which arose on the heels of the observation she had made. Of course it was Christopher's superior power which caused the difference. Besides, he was yet to paint his great picture. He had not exhibited for years. The fact was, though Ellen was only partially acquainted

with the truth, that his work had been so unfailingly and remorselessly rejected year after year now, until the term reached a decade of a man's life, that Christopher, being a poor man, conceived himself called upon, for the sake of others, to abstain from further indulgence in what was to him the expensive luxury of thus procuring for himself fresh disappointment. A good many of the older artists whom the Hatherleys encountered knew Christopher again, and pointed him out to their neighbours as an old art student, one of the many who begin by giving some promise which comes to nothing, who had subsided, poor soul, into a drawing teacher in some provincial town. The sentence was doubly hard on him, for he had been a swell student in his younger days, a squire or great banker's son. But some misfortune befell the family, there was a smash of the bank, or an agent bolted. Whatever it was, Hatherley was not to blame. All the same, he had to work for his living afterwards in the best way he could, like less daintily reared men. He was not a bad lot by any means; on the contrary, he had always been one of your good, simple-minded kind of beggars, and somebody who had stumbled upon him in his country place found him, as was to be expected, the stay of a parcel of women, his relations. He had turned out a duffer, of course, otherwise he would have done better for himself; but he had never got past his

raw, green stage. He was understood to have hankerings after high art and all that sort of humbug to this day. However, old Hatherley was welcome whenever he chose to appear in his former haunts, where his earlier associates, though they did not say it in so many words, held unmistakably they had shot far ahead of him.

These former comrades were a little condescending in their cordiality, but they were not so tempted to patronise as were the young men who languidly and glibly expounded their views to Christopher, or sought to mystify him as superannuated and fair game.

It was well that Ellen did not hear their mingled instruction and chaff, or, if she heard any part of it, failed entirely to comprehend the performance in its presumption and impertinence. Indeed, when Ellen was of the group, the young fellows forgot a good many of their wise airs and mischievous propensities, and became better occupied with the consideration that old Hatherley's niece, though she was from the country like himself, was fair to see and pleasant to hear when she spoke to those she knew in the circle; in fact, she bore about her the undeniable air of a young woman who, though her uncle was an old fogey of a drawing-master, had been well brought up and mixed in good society. But for that matter these severe censors and experienced judges felt forced to own that though old Hatherley had

“subsided” into a drawing-master, and his overcoat was out of date and a little worn, even as his beard was of an ancient cut and his head grey and slightly bald, he still retained the quiet unconscious bearing of a gentleman.

CHAPTER II.

NEWBOULD'S STUDIO.

"I THINK we shall just be in time for Newbould's, Ellen," said Christopher, looking at his watch.

Ellen had been flagging the least in the world, calling to mind that there were other entertainments in London besides painters' "shows," suspecting that, in spite of the indefatigable qualities of her years, she would be just too tired to enjoy thoroughly the play her uncle had promised to take her to see in the evening, and reflecting with dawning dismay on all the commissions she held from Aunt Sophy, Aunt Anne, and Aunt Phyllis, to not one of which she had yet attended. But she rallied her forces loyally at the word.

Unquestionably they must not miss Mr. Newbould's. His was one of the first studios in London. He was the painter with whom Christopher had "set up shop," as he called it, twenty years before. Uncle Chris was always interested in Newbould's work, even fascinated by it, whether the fascination was that of approbation

or censure. Ellen prepared to plunge anew into the art vortex, and was so intent on preserving her own enthusiasm that she failed to notice the mixture of desire and reluctance in Christopher's tone.

The hansom conveyed the couple to the remotest suburb they had yet visited, and set them down before a fine old-fashioned house in its own tolerably extensive grounds. Seventy or eighty years before the place had been a country-house, and it still retained an indescribable precedence and distinction among its parvenu neighbours. Every modern convenience had doubtless been added to its comfort, and the whole establishment displayed at a glance the pervading good taste of a man in whose calling taste was essential. But, possibly from some element in the character of the resident, the house and grounds had undergone little change since they were the dwelling of a Secretary of State under William Pitt.

Not only the terrace with the aloes in summer and the yews at all seasons, and the shrubbery with its thickets of lilacs and hawthorns, remained the same; but indoors the plain hall, the heavy if stately staircase, the morning-room lined with cold and decidedly faded blue taffetas, into which the visitors were first ushered, had been left unaltered. Coming from the prevailing brick and mortar, the crowded compressed spaces, the rage for progress combined with the equal rage for re-

troggression into elaborate picturesqueness, that they had recently seen, Ellen was impressed, though she could scarcely have defined the impression, with this atmosphere of seclusion and simplicity, as if the owner disdained either for art's or for his own sake to bring down art to domestic uses.

"Mr. Newbould does not care to live among signs of his art," said Ellen.

"Oh, no," Christopher answered with a laugh. "John Newbould is not the man to turn his house into a shop, and eat and drink beauty."

"But why?" persisted the puzzled Ellen. "Is it on the principle of the Newfoundland merchants, who have everything eatable on their dinner-table except cod-fish? Can he be ashamed of his profession?"

"Not exactly," answered Christopher more slowly. "No; shame is not the word. I don't suppose he would repudiate the guild as Congreve declined to be a literary character to Voltaire. Still I can fancy, if John Newbould had been born a man of high social position, he would have preferred to exercise his gifts in private. He would have felt offended and affronted by public homage coming to him through them."

"Then he must be ashamed of his highest honour," said Ellen indignantly. "I thought he was devoted to his art; I thought he let nothing come between him and his work, and for that

very reason did more than any other modern painter of repute. And you have always said that he had, from the first, even a higher conviction than was just of his own merit."

"Yes, yes, all that is perfectly true," acquiesced her uncle hastily; "but don't let us pick holes in the man's coat in his own house. Here comes the servant who took our cards. Now remember, Ellen, you are going to see the more than clever work of a very clever man, of whose grand capacity for good work we may all be proud."

The Hatherleys were shown to the studio, but there was evidently no "of course" in the proceeding, as there had been in the other houses, where the solemn men-servants and the trim maid-servants were keenly alive to the fact that master's pictures were on private view, and that all visitors then came expressly to stare at the work.

When the uncle and niece entered the spacious well-lit painting-room, the one addition to the house made by the painter, it contained some very valuable "properties," but had no elegant trifles skilfully displayed, and it was evidently in its work-a-day condition.

The couple found themselves in a small select coterie of gentlemen; and Ellen, for the first time in their round, felt abashed, as if her presence there were forward and unbecoming.

But the master of the studio, easily recog-

nisable, came out of the cluster of satellites and received the visitors graciously enough, which was some comfort, the girl said to herself in her trepidation and dawning vexation, though she added quickly she could not say there was any cordiality to spare.

9 In truth, when Christopher Hatherley's card had been taken up to John Newbould as he was in the act of bestowing a little of his brief, well-earned leisure on one or two literary men, more or less distinguished, and art lovers in high places, privileged aspirants to John Newbould's society, which was coveted in proportion to the difficulty of obtaining it, the painter had been guilty of an involuntary curl of his lip, while he tossed aside the card a little impatiently. But he was too well bred a man, too much a man of the world, to refuse to fulfil an unmistakable obligation, and he was too proud and well assured of himself and his position to mind the rusticity which might have gathered like lichen about Christopher's looks and manners, or to be apprehensive about an injudicious reference to the two men's former relations—which, to be sure, had only been casual and temporary—before the present associates, whom John Newbould prized and liked as much as he could like any human beings beyond his own family.

There was a considerable though not a glaring contrast between the two men, who greeted each

other rather formally. Both were middle-aged, and both looked older than their years. But in Christopher Hatherley's case maturity had not brought the impassiveness—all-observant, yet refusing to answer to observation in turn—which it had set on John Newbould's well-chiselled features. Christopher's rather full lips and grey eyes were still as instinct with susceptibility, and in nearly as great danger of betraying his feelings, as when he was a young fellow. Both were tall, big men, but Newbould stood perfectly erect, while Hatherley's shoulders were a trifle bent, as if they had been accustomed to bear burdens. Christopher remained the gentleman he had always been, but he was careless of the outward marks of his condition, and too indifferent on the point to struggle against evidences in boots, and gloves, and country-made coat, of the shabbiness induced by narrow means. John Newbould, in spite of the safeguard of his genius and pride, exhibited a shade of the punctilious refinement and elaborate propriety—in the very coarseness of his well-fitting morning coat, as well as in the cat's-eye stones at his wrists—of the man who has risen, however gradually and gracefully, in the social scale.

“Is this your daughter, Hatherley?” asked the great painter with polite though blundering attention. “I am sorry my wife and daughters have gone to spend their Easter in Rome.”

"He ought to have known that Uncle Chris is not married, could not have married," Ellen protested, with not the less liveliness that it was done silently. "I suppose his wife and daughters are much too grand to stay at home and help to receive his friends, like the eager interested women in the families of the other painters we have visited. I don't like Uncle Christopher's old fellow-student, although he does benefit the world with the unremitting excellence of his work."

Ellen had speedy opportunity of judging Mr. Newbould's work, though it remained at the further end of the large studio, and had not been brought forward into a prominent place, to claim absorbing attention like the other artist's pictures.

"Do you care to see my pictures for the Academy?" inquired the painter with still more indifference than he had betrayed in investigating the relationship between Christopher and Ellen.

"Without question. What have we come here for except to see the pictures?" the irrepressible Ellen was privately exclaiming, even as Voltaire made his retort to Congreve. Yet Mr. Newbould had not issued invitations to a show, any more than Congreve had withdrawn from the delicate attentions of the Duchess of Marlborough, and made overtures towards good fellowship with his brother *littérateur*. Ellen was subdued in spite

of herself by the recollection, and by the courtesy—though it was an effort of courtesy—with which the painter attended the visitors to his pictures.

Taking the pictures altogether—how fine they were! what a wonderfully high average of good, sometimes splendid work, they presented; even Ellen saw this reluctantly, little as she understood of the subject. Christopher, who had a wistful, intense appreciation of good work, and who was himself an honest, earnest worker so far as his powers went, confessed it from the bottom of his soul. He had been accustomed to say that Newbould, with all his capacity, was a superficial, one-sided worker; that he did not care to select worthy subjects, and did not go to the heart of those he selected; that he either could not or would not see the truth which might have been found beneath the falsehood, the nobility beneath the spiritual meanness of many of his delineations. He pleased himself and a world which affected cynicism, with his light scorn launched on every side, but not without a veil of taste and tact, and decorous regard for authorities. There was nothing defiant in Newbould's attitudes, far less anything reckless. What should he defy? He was a most prosperous man, valued and reckoned safe even by many most orthodox people, because his heresy was so refined, and, compared with that of others, so respectable. Besides, did he not afford occasional contradictory evidence of his

deep sympathy with what was pure and noble, and his high admiration for it ?

It was the fantastic, romantic, and sentimental, next to the vulgar, that Newbould abjured. Still his work had often exasperated Christopher Hatherley almost beyond bearing. The very amount of truth in his unscrupulous, unsparing representations, which were only restricted by taste and expediency, and which had compelled Christopher to laugh at the same moment that he had coloured with shame and indignation, had set his teeth still more on edge, and he had been tortured by the problem how much Newbould was conscious or unconscious of his cultured allegiance to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Some of his earlier work, when he and Christopher had been nearer agreeing, from the spirit of which the successful painter had widely departed, and certain broadly exceptional pictures in which he still indulged at times, seemed to be proofs against his moral blindness, or were they only evidence of his moral double dealing ? Had the last and heaviest punishment come upon him ? Were the wider vision, the grander and actually the truer conception, gone from him for ever ? They might not have paid so well in his generation, because such art is a lesson and has to train its followers. Few comparatively, even of the well-disposed and intellectual, might have been prepared to accompany the painter in his reverent looking up and

looking down. Again, the strain might have impaired the gifts which, though great, most certainly had their limits; and because Newbould had slighted and forsaken the best gift, had it been absolutely withdrawn from him, until he could not rise beyond what was of the earth, earthy? Or was he, to this day, deliberately and persistently selling his glorious birthright and signing away his high calling?

There were signs in the work before Christopher, in the middle of the ample testimony to trained skill and honourable pains which he had never refused to acknowledge, nay, which he had been fain to appreciate, that he had nevertheless not been without sufficient warrant for his lifelong silent controversy with the painter.

Here was a landscape with its salient points, which the crowd could lay hold of, all seized and magnificently or delicately portrayed, but with its underlying secret coolly ignored and omitted, so that Newbould, whether he knew it or not, had not painted it for immortality.

There was a picture entitled "The Modern Prodigal and his Father," in which what some of the adoring critics would call a delightfully shameless and supercilious vagabond was, with a brazen face, extorting terms from a poor cowering humbug, trembling in his pompousness for the whited sepulchre of his own lying reputation.

There was another picture called the "Pledges,"

in which two lovers, not equal in rank, but very much on the same level in character, exchanged vows and tokens. But the exquisite young fool, in the middle of his passion, was not able to hide a recoil of mingled dismay and disgust at the common, coarse locket, containing the gaudy coloured photograph of his sweetheart, which the girl herself had given him. She had spent her savings upon it, she had offered it to him with a certain degree of fondness and pride, and he turned away his eyes and asked himself could this offence be even a caricature of her? Did she expect him to wear it? Would he ever be able to endure appearing even once in his own sight and in hers—which was of far less consequence—with the meretricious trinket at his watch chain? On her part, the rustic beauty pouted a little as she looked sharply and doubtfully at the finely wrought gold ring he had already put on her plump finger, and bidden her wear for his sake. It was thin and light, when it ought to have been broad and heavy, and to have had stones set in it. What was a ring worth without sparkling green and red stones? Did he not think she deserved a good, substantial gold ring with big stones? She would not care to show off this shabby thing to her envious companions.

There would be much applause and laughter at the contending and lifelike feelings in the faces of the couple, after Mr. Newbould's admirers

had worn themselves out with expatiating on the superexcellence of his drawing and flesh tints, the sustained tone of the whole, the harmony procured by the judicious dealing with accessories. Christopher prized the drawing and the flesh tints, the tone and the harmony, as much as any man could prize them, but as he gazed he tugged furiously at his moustache, and turned abruptly to another picture.

CHAPTER III

NEWBOULD'S SAINTS.

AS it happened, the picture was still harder for him to bear. It was one of Newbould's saints, that were so picturesque and attractive, addressing themselves alike to the singular credulity of the saint worshipper, and to the condescending Platonic approval of the unbelieving Sadducee and Epicurean. Newbould every now and then painted a saint, to keep his hand in for variety, to show his versatility; perhaps with a certain vague yearning after what was so far apart from his ordinary walk. Whatever his motive in so doing, he delighted the simple among his numerous clients, vindicating, as he thus did, their faith in his radical goodness under all his sneers and scoffs, and he compelled the Sadducee and Epicurean to tolerate and to put an æsthetic value on such work.

Newbould's saints, by the way, did not retain a single trait of sin-soiled struggling humanity. Though he was a Protestant, he instinctively canonised his subjects, whether they were Pro-

testant or Roman Catholic—generally they were Roman Catholic—and raised them to the heights of beatitude on his canvas. One felt that the longer he lived and every fresh saint he painted, the more he was disposed to regard his version of angelic purity and guilelessness with the gentle pity of superior knowledge of the world, and of the increased practicality and force of character which such knowledge supplies. Newbould's saints were in malice children, but in understanding they were not men. They were unsophisticated dreamers and disinterested enthusiasts, fit for the painter to pat tenderly on the back, laugh at softly, and use for his own purposes. They formed warnings rather than examples, and their existence was so exceptional and abnormal that there was not the slightest occasion for it to modify either a man's practice or his opinions with regard to his fellows. Newbould's saints, if they ever lived, did not appear in the world once in a century. Naturally, too, the painter saw the saint largely, almost entirely, in a pictorial light. He made a picture of him in every sense, bringing him out in some finely appropriate surrounding, in gardens of lilies or meadows of asphodel, before stately, sumptuous shrines, in sternly simple cells, teaching bands of white-robed neophytes, well-nigh as innocent and exalted as himself; or he showed him as the centre of ardent enthusiastic satellites faithful to

death. Or it might be Newbould chose to invest his saint with striking contrasts, and placed him among the tokens of coarse ostentation or sordid penury, assailed by brutal foes, and delivering his final testimony in the very sublimity of unresisting yet unsubdued weakness.

The artist's strength was chiefly spent on these pictorial effects; and, with all his cleverness, he fell into the error of overdoing them a little, so that the more keenly analytical of his friends found the perpetual elaborate picturesqueness a fault, and were slightly bored by it. But the keenly analytical on any side are never a numerous body; and the mass of Newbould's admirers, with large sections of the outer world, notably the religious world, the members of which were not connoisseurs in art, and only knew the painter by his saints, fell into ecstasies over their saintliness. Had it been the fashion to adorn Protestant cathedrals with modern frescoes, undoubtedly the man who, in his worldly work, was thoroughly worldly-minded; who had no real belief in genuine manliness or womanliness, in honesty, earnestness, or human kindness; who, if he served God at all, served him in company with Mammon, and put Mammon first, would have been selected by a bench of bishops, chapter of deans, archdeacons, major and minor canons, even—though Newbould had a great, hardly concealed contempt for the folly and

illiberality of Dissent—by assemblies of the more refined Dissenters, to paint the sacred frescoes in the principal cathedrals.

But Christopher Hatherley always grew stern when he came in contact with any of Newbould's saints. At the same time in this, as in other instances, the successful man and his work exercised an extraordinary fascination over the man who had been a failure.

Their original connection had been brief, and never close. Their very different careers had only touched, that was all; yet the life of the one in its brilliance, while it "killed" the pale tones of the other's life, had proved an irresistible attraction to Christopher, and had influenced him at every stage in his history. It might be the simple result of antithesis, or it might be the dumb longing with which the man who could not express what was in him, looked on the man whose ability in delivering his message had either been from the beginning, or had become the foremost among his peers.

The interest was not mutual. John Newbould had a simple recollection of Christopher in the light of a temporary associate, who, as such, possessed a slight claim upon him.

For anything further Hatherley dwelt in his old companion's mind as an irreclaimable muff, probably become goody-goody in tone of mind, certainly priggish—one who, in spite of his antecedents, had always belonged to the order of

unlicked cubs, and who, having failed utterly in life, had further sunk into the ranks of the shabby genteel.

Now John Newbould had a quiet but profound respect for success in any shape, and an unqualified contempt for failure—a phase of mind which was in itself a commentary on his estimation of his saints, who had always been in some way or other beaten men. But this did not disturb or distress him in their delineation. He did not believe they could or ought to have conquered by the power of any might on earth or in heaven. He had a private, cool conviction they were made to be beaten and to serve as art studies, and that, had they known their destiny, they ought to have been content with it. The smallest amount of the success which he claimed and prized for himself and his friends would have destroyed the charm of these saints, and robbed them of the very essence of their saintliness. Let them appear in their isolation, strive and suffer (but not advance the world an inch in its moral progress, and so never conquer), all for the good—that is, the æsthetic gratification—of their neighbours. Not that Newbould dreamt of classing Christopher as a *saint*—Christopher, with his old stupidity, in the midst of some cleverness, and stubbornness, his rounding shoulders, his ill-made coat, his extremely subordinate calling. No doubt these disadvantages might have been lost sight of had

they been partially hidden by the mists of remote centuries, had even fifty years' distance lent a little enchantment to the view, so as to enable Newbould to get rid more or less of his subject's human frailties and homeliness. For the painter's saints could not stand the broad light of the present day, and he was so far conscious of it that he was entirely sceptical as to the existence of saints among his contemporaries, in the commonplace troubles and raw controversies of the nineteenth century.

There was no more cynical judge of the good deeds and their doers, belonging to his own generation, than John Newbould, the rapt, well-nigh inspired painter, as some people held him, of mediæval saints.

Newbould only felt a faint curiosity with regard to Christopher's opinion of his pictures. The successful painter took little interest, for that matter, in most of his brother artists and their work. He was actually unacquainted with the very names and studios of the greater proportion even of those who had made a certain mark in art within the last twenty years. A very few men and women who had gone further, won the world's verdict of approval, and were beyond question distinguished in their respective lines—as he himself was famous—John Newbould received into his select circle of friends, and honoured with his commendation and esteem. Strangely

enough, where so self-confident and self-concentrated a man was in question, he behaved in this respect as if he entertained a mean and cowardly dread of compromising himself. But the truth was he had not a particle of faith—not to say in mute, inglorious Miltons, but in Miltons who had spoken and remained unappreciated, or only been partially appreciated, by their neighbours—Miltons who accepted five pounds and gave their epic poems to the world. He had very little faith in art itself, apart from successful achievement, though he did not fail to assert on fit occasions, generally in the abstract, the dignity of art. He acted as if he were persuaded—which probably he was—that such dignity was best maintained, in his own case, by his living in retirement and sedulously minding his own business, to the exclusion of that of other people. In truth there was very little business of any other living English artist which he considered worthy of his attention.

In this, as in every other detail, John Newbould was the reverse of Christopher Hatherley. Though Christopher had been the acknowledged indisputable head of the first school in English art, he would still have been sensitively alive to the opinion of the merest tyro, woman or child, on his productions. He would have taken, just as he did now, a wide and lively interest in his fellow-workers and their work. He would have found out secret merits and beauties to praise in

the most unlikely quarters. He would have been as zealous and rash as when he was a lad in expounding and insisting on his discoveries, and no doubt would have come to grief sometimes, and cracked his credit for unerring discrimination in his championship, whether he mistook geese for swans, or whether his swans were still merely in their ugly-duck stage to the eyes of the world. He would have been haunted at the height of his own prosperity by a sense of wistful self-reproach, because he was so fully recognised and well off, while some painters, of whom the world was not worthy, were starving in garrets or dying in despair. He could never have seen that it was right and fit, with no blame to him or anybody, that they should so die in order to preserve the integrity of art, and be a sort of picturesque art-martyrs, on the principle of the art-saints, to supply the needs of future painters. Art would still have been its own reward to him, but he could never have bidden it be the sole reward of another painter; whereas Newbould, who in his practice laid such stress on the reward of worldly success that, by comparison, he did not seem to care to be the servant of art for her own sake, was continually, when he spoke at all on the common topic in the hearing of his fellow-painters, holding up, in flagrant contradiction of his personal example, the precept of living and following art without a single mercenary thought.

It was from an instinctive consciousness of Newbould's indifference to his opinion, quite as much as from their antagonistic views, or from such burning jealousy or bitter envy as may still fight for its existence in a good man's breast, that Christopher, who had almost as great a mania for digging out excellencies as other men have for unearthing defects, found his tongue tied on the beauties which he could have so easily named, and of which he had even a passionate sense, in Newbould's pictures. Christopher muttered something about the fineness of the work, and instead of remarking farther on what was before him, reminded the owner of the studio that he, Christopher, still possessed a bit of Newbould's early work—"Faithful to Death"—"which was painted, you remember, in the same year as the 'Lost Child.'"

"Ah!" Newbould answered, with a smile of half pity, half scorn for his former self, "that is an old story."

It was as though he had said, "There was no subtlety, or irony, or finish there. I have gone far ahead of that." And Christopher, on his side, was thinking, "With all its youthful errors, you could not do anything like that now, not though you were condemned to death for the inability to repeat the performance."

"You used to be fond of historical subjects, Hatherley," said Newbould, pursuing his care-

lessly civil inquiries; "do you still affect them? To be sure, the modern tendency is to treat all historical sentiment as bosh."

"Unless one goes back to a Roman or Greek era, or chooses an Egyptian or Assyrian stage," observed Christopher with a momentary twinkle in his eyes. "I am aware that anything later is mock heroic and high fantastic, or, what is worse, lath and buckram; but I admit I have still a sneaking kindness for Shakespeare's English kings and queens, even for Clarendon's nobles and Fuller's worthies. Only, happily, I have very little time and means to waste on foolish dabbling in historical art."

Newbould did not get up the fiction of regretting his former fellow-student's lack of opportunity to follow his bent. John Newbould was so far a sincere man that, being too proud to experience a craving for universal popularity, he never laid himself out to be agreeable. Indeed, in spite of a fund of keen, if superficial, observation, some dry wit, and a veneering of cold courtesy, he was, like all intensely selfish people, a reserved, pre-occupied, ungenial man in general society. Newbould was utterly indifferent to Hatherley's dabbings, and could not pretend that he was otherwise, so the conversation languished, till soon afterwards the uncle and niece left.

"Uncle Chris," broke out Ellen the moment they were in the hansom again, "if that is what

it is to be a great painter, then I can only hope *you'll* never be great."

"Spare your apprehensions, my dear," said Christopher with a shrug of his shoulders; "there is not much likelihood of that. What says the old adage?—

'If a man is not tall at twenty
He will never be tall;
If a man is not wise at thirty
He will never be wise;
If a man is not rich at forty
He will never be rich.'

Ergo—I have lost my chance."

But in his heart—by its very soreness of mortification; by the long hard struggle which he knew well enough would, in spite of his common sense, only end with his life; by the fulness and acuteness of his perception, alike of his attainments and shortcomings, he, too, believed that, underneath whatever fatal impediments, he had something of the true painter in him.

"I think," went on Ellen, "that Mr. Newbould is simply detestable."

"Say, rather, that we are simply spiteful," said her uncle, beginning to recover himself.

"Spiteful! you! I!" Ellen repudiated the idea indignantly. "And why should we be spiteful pray?" she asked, opening wide her dark brown eyes, well set under their dark chestnut brows and lashes.

"Because we cannot do such eminent, capital

work," said Christopher, laughing more naturally and cheerfully ; " because we are not John Newbould's equals in many things—I won't say in all—no, not by a long, long chalk." He finished a little ruefully the admission he had begun heartily.

" If you had said you were inferior in everything to Mr. Newbould, Uncle Christopher," said Ellen, with much stateliness of offence expressed, especially in the full Christian name by which she addressed her kinsman, " I should have been compelled to judge either that you were hypocritical, or that you were weak-minded, a victim to false humility."

" But I left a loophole of escape, and I say, child," said Christopher, beginning to betray symptoms of vexed compunction, " don't let us abuse Newbould more than he deserves. He would laugh at the wild idea of our being rivals. But I will confess to you, Ellen, that though our respective work never came or could come into open competition, though the fancy is often an idle dream even in my own eyes, and would seem an amusing instance of gross presumption in the eyes of the world, I have never been quite able to keep from regarding Newbould as my successful rival. It is a weakness of mind of which I should not care to speak to everybody. But I have mentioned it to you, Ellen, and I am going on to say that as one would like to be fair to one's antagonist, as I should certainly not care for the green-eyed

monster to get possession of me altogether, and transform me into a man mad at merit to which he cannot attain, and at success which he will never reach, there is urgent need that we should be strictly just both in public and private to Newbould, for our own sakes, still more than on his account. You understand that, and will remember it when we discuss him and his work at Courtfield—so be charitable as you love me, Ellen,” ended Christopher, half in earnest, half in jest; “don’t say any ill of Newbould and his pictures to your aunts; don’t set your Aunt Phyllis and your Aunt Anne inveighing against him and them. Don’t tempt me to turn slanderer and backbiter in my mature years, when I ought to know better and be thinking of other things.”

Ellen listened, half softened, half angry. She was touched by the confidence which her companion put in her. At the same time she was so inconsistent that she hated to hear him undervalue himself, even while she loved him for doing it. Christopher was at once so proud and so humble, so impracticable in many ways where his own interests were concerned. It would have been such a comfort to herself, and, she was sure, to her aunts, if they saw things as she did; nay, she could not help thinking it would have been a great relief to Uncle Chris, in spite of his effort at magnanimity, if he would have suffered himself and other people to abuse Newbould and his work

roundly—to shut their eyes to the splendour of its execution, and employ magnifying glasses in regarding the intolerance of its tolerance, the infidelity of its creed, the high-handed insolence and one-sidedness of its definitions.

But of course, if Christopher took her into his confidence and bade her, to please him, find fault sparingly with Mr. Newbould and his pictures, her censure must be of the mildest. She could only feel thankful that her uncle did not further enjoin her to sing Mr. Newbould's praises, which might have been perfectly true, but would have stuck in her throat.

Christopher divined her silent thoughts, and pursued his advantage in his honest attempt to curb his own malice. Was this an instance of that crucifying of the flesh, with its affections and lusts, which the Bible certainly commands? Ellen asked herself in passing.

"John Newbould has been perfectly courteous, and almost friendly," he said gravely and gently. "It is not every one who is accorded the privilege of admittance to his studio. It is a great privilege to a man who has to work in the country—far from opportunities for comparison and criticism."

"A cat may look at a king, or at a king's work I suppose," observed Ellen morosely, rather than flippantly, "and when Mr. Newbould contributes to the Academy, where his work may be seen next

month, I imagine he means all the world to have the benefit of it."

"Ay," answered Christopher, "but the best place in which to see a picture, as you can now judge for yourself, is the artist's studio, with the artist at your elbow to throw light on his intentions."

"I thought Mr. Newbould was so great a painter that his intentions would explain themselves," said Ellen, holding up her head and speaking with the elaborate meekness of a pupil who has learnt her lesson only too well.

"Don't be a goose, Ellen," said Christopher a little testily, for the subject was a very serious one to him; "a painter's intentions may be ever so vigorously and dexterously expressed, and yet that is not to say the ignorant and vulgar are to have the wit to penetrate them."

"The ignorant and vulgar!" echoed Ellen incredulously, and then both laughed, for the uncle and niece were a pair of firm friends, who for the most part saw into each other's meaning wonderfully well, considering that he was an elderly, battered, patient genius who had always missed his mark, and she was only a warm-hearted, hot-tempered girl of quick intelligence, with keen tenacious sympathies.

"And is Mr. Newbould's studio so sacred?" she began again.

"Of course he admits of no interruption when

he is at work. He is a wise and fortunate man," said Christopher with a smothered sigh; then he roused himself to add with his honest candour, "He is a true worker in this, that he puts his work before everything; he neither shirks it, nor trifles over it. I have heard he has turned dukedom, as I can conceive he would turn princedom, from his door when he sports his oak. He loves his work in his own way. He is ambitious according to his idea of ambition. Even when he lets himself get hurried, careless, and besotted, as even your cleverest, coolest-headed, successful man who worships his own success, is bound to become besotted at times, an onlooker can never call it scamped work; he is compelled in common fairness to admit that, to give the devil his due, John Newbould has still taken some thought and pains."

Ellen did not catch up the phrase; she was sitting thinking contritely how her uncle, ever since she had known him, was subjected to incessant torturing, wearing interruptions of his work, which might have been avoided in a measure if the painter had been greater than the man, or the man less than the painter. Yet Ellen could not wish Uncle Chris to have been an unkind brother, a selfish uncle, or a lukewarm friend, in order to blossom—if that were possible for a heartless man—into a great painter.

Poor Ellen, notwithstanding what she had seen

and heard, still clung desperately to poetic justice in the distribution of honours, if not of fortune.

But at the same time Ellen must feel conscience-stricken because of her own iniquities, which need not have increased Christopher's inevitable burden. True, he had been capable of turning her out of his studio and locking the door against her, whether as child or girl, when she had interrupted him without sufficient cause. She had even known him be a little rude to Aunt Sophy, crabbed to Aunt Anne, and positively furious at Aunt Phyllis in similar circumstances. But never had Ellen, not to say her aunts, intruded on the painter with any personal trouble real to them, that Christopher had not, after a short struggle, with a wry face and a frown so fleeting that the intruder hardly noticed it, thrown down his brush to listen, to sympathize gruffly, and to console with a kind of rough tenderness peculiar to the man. Uncle Chris had been too good, and his sisters and niece too thoughtless. At this distressing conclusion Ellen exclaimed once more, defiantly and inconsistently, rearing a swelling throat—one of those swan-like throats which belonged naturally to her tall, well-poised figure—
—"I am glad I am not John Newbould's niece."

Christopher started from a reverie. "You were never more mistaken in your life, child," he said with animation. "John Newbould has been most generous to every member of his family.

He has brought up his sister's orphan children with noble liberality. He is a good husband, and a father indulgent to excess."

It was not because Christopher Hatherley was a gossip of an eccentric, droll sort—though that was in him also—that he knew all these particulars. In the fascination which John Newbould's career exercised over him, Christopher had made himself master of every detail in the history of the man, who did not know whether he, Christopher, were married or single, or whether he still painted historical subjects, or not at all.

"And what does he do for the world outside his own family circle?" asked Ellen shrewdly.

Christopher was silent, abashed, as if he himself had been the defaulter. Who had ever heard of John Newbould's lending a helping hand to a struggling brother artist? When had the great painter been known to go out of his way in order to speak a generous word for a fellow-worker? If there had been such cases, they were so rare that the exceptions established the rule. If the successful man had waived the smallest advantage in favour of less privileged individuals, certainly his left hand was kept in ignorance of what his right hand did. John Newbould gave charity as he discharged his other duties, duly, with dignity, and without niggardliness. He was a gentleman in his dealings. He was respected, though he was not loved, by

tradespeople and servants. But as for the sympathy, good-will, and self-denial of the "kindly man among his kind," whether his manners be bland or blunt, his temper perfect or defective, such qualities had no existence in John Newbould's composition. He always acted unhesitatingly as if he had too much to achieve on his own account for him to be called upon to do anything on his neighbour's behalf. He expected every other aspirant after the prizes of art to carve his own way to them, as John Newbould had carved his way—to do or die without foreign countenance or support; and if he died in the doing, well, perhaps all the better, since there would be a clearer field, with fewer encumbrances, for the survivors.

The crowd of weaker, less self-reliant men, who are apt to hang on the skirts of the successful in every calling, understood perfectly John Newbould's principles in this respect, and agreed unanimously to give him as little trouble as possible.

His correspondence was limited and quite manageable, without even the assistance of wife or daughter as private secretary. Very few young artists, and only those who lived at a distance from the man and the gossip of the studios, wrote to ask John Newbould's advice in the pursuit of their profession, or when they went abroad petitioned for letters of introduction

to foreign artists. He would not have wasted his time to reply, far less risked his reputation to promote the object of those who could not attain the end they sought without applying to him.

It is just possible that his purse might have proved more accessible to gentle beggars, since he was not an avaricious man ; but with the world's tolerably accurate estimate of John Newbould's character, only the desperate or the shameless made a claim on his purse.

Christopher Hatherley, the drudging drawing-master, who had to contribute to the support of his maiden sisters, not only distributed gratis a thousand professional hints to embryo artists, but when he was brought in contact with their necessities, he actually relieved them out of his comparative penury—to a far greater extent than John Newbould dispensed alms to them out of his opulence.

CHAPTER IV.

COURTFIELD—THE COTTAGE AND ITS OCCUPANTS.

PROVIDENCE had been kind to Christopher Hatherley in casting his lines in Courtfield. He acknowledged the boon without any reservation, because, in the course of his life, he had made a social descent from the Park to the Cottage. It may be said, in parenthesis, that there was but one "Park" to the natives of Courtfield; and though there were many cottages, there happened to be only one which had such claims to pre-eminence that it could rank without question or misconception as "the Cottage."

Courtfield was a village in an out-of-the-way corner of green Warwickshire, of classic and hunting renown, with its old towns, castles, and manors, its rich meadows and richer woodlands. To this day Courtfield was two good miles from a railway station, and Christopher, in going and coming three times a week to and from the great Brummagem school in which he figured as art professor, had to add this amount of walking exercise to his professional toil. Courtfield owed

its existence to various architects belonging to different generations, who had not been hampered by any attention to unity of design, and whose ideas of house space had been of the most liberal kind. The cottages had the look of having been sown broadcast without any regard to angles, while the buildings rejoiced in as great contrasts of material as one county and climate could well permit. Some were so old as to be made of a combination of wood and plaster, with cross-bars of wood supporting the crazy black and white bulging structures, surmounted by overhanging moss-green thatch roofs. Some were so new as to be constructed of raw and bald red brick, with red tiles for fiery-tinted head coverings. A farmhouse, with its offices, straw shed, and orchard, had either intruded itself, or had in course of time been intruded upon and closely besieged by its labourers' cottages, and those of a smith and wheelwright, a shop of all wares, and an ale-house, till it stood in the centre of the village. The deep green, russet, and yellow cut grass, hay, and straw, which in piles or in forkfuls and rakefuls generally lay or hung about the farm offices, as dusty flour sticks to a mill; the gnarled boughs of the fruit trees of the orchard, with a pink and white flush of blossom in spring, and a burden of tawny-brown, scarlet-streaked, purple fruit in autumn; together with the foliage of a maple-tree which grew in the flagged courtyard

before the old-fashioned weather-stained farmhouse, shedding its foliage triumphantly in November in leaves of ruddy gold, when every other of nature's colours waxed wan and dim, constituted some of the advantages of Courtfield to Christopher Hatherley. Another strong point in the village occurred at the next turn, where the make-believe of a street formed a grass-grown triangle, in compliment to a huge and ancient oak-tree. It looked—what homely antiquarians said was true—coeval with the little grey square-towered church, and the ivy-grown, two-storied parsonage in its shade. To the disgust alike of the oldest inhabitant, and of Christopher, the painter, the parsonage, with its broad low lattice windows and diamond-shaped panes, was found by the present incumbent too picturesque to live in, and had been vacated by him in favour of a large modern dwelling-house a mile from the village.

These Courtfield charms, along with fresh corn-lands and pastures—where Hodge and Dolly ploughed and made hay, and reaped, while they bore cold and heat steadfastly from year's end to year's end with few disturbing influences from the world without—where cattle and sheep ruminated with hardly more unbroken peace—dewy hedgerows, by which glow-worms crept; deep lanes, rich in wild flowers and ferns; thick coppices melodious with

the songs of birds, like other great sweet undisturbed gifts of God in nature, wore well, and lost nothing by familiarity.

Christopher, though he saw the country every day in the commonest light, never felt satiety, far less contempt, where it was concerned.

Even in the matter of the compulsory descent from the Park to the Cottage—to which the Misses Hatherley never failed to refer as to the great calamity of the family, though time had reconciled them in a great measure to the humiliation—Christopher was not quite sure he had lost in all respects. The Park, as a building, did not date further back than George the Second. It was a great, heavy, red-brick house, faced with white—after the fashion of old regimentals—roomy enough to have quartered the troop once associated with these regimentals instead of a single family; but it was destitute of a single artistic beauty except a fine stack of chimneys. The park proper was little more than a paddock—termed a park by courtesy—the gardens were at a distance from the house, and had not been kept up with any care or taste. They were after the pattern of the house itself—out of fashion and formal, yet neither venerable nor particularly stately or quaint. They were like an old age, which has necessarily lost all the freshness and brightness of youth, while it has not what it never possessed—the element of uniqueness—and

has acquired neither mellowness nor hoariness, but is, in fact, a commonplace advanced stage of life which, somehow, remains still unripe.

Now the Cottage, which—as the Misses Hatherley liked to tell—had been built for their grandfather's old housekeeper when their father came into possession, and had been made to serve as a refuge when the family fell into misfortune, deserved a little more consideration from its present master. It was white, one-storied, and formed three sides of a square. It had a cumbersome wooden porch, over which two roses, Ayrshire and damask, strove for mastery. The house stood among the flower borders which surrounded its lawn, with its shrubbery, strawberry beds, and kitchen garden in the background. It was a garden much affected by butterflies, bees, and beetles, not to say birds, when the last were allowed to disport themselves there.

For his sister Anne, though the best tempered of women, vexed the soul of Christopher by waging war with the swallows and thrushes, just as his sister Phyllis offended his taste by a certain amount of encouragement to bedding-out plants and ribbon borders, and his niece Ellen tried his patience by her girlish weakness for introducing into unsuitable nooks modern monstrosities of rockeries and rooteries: still the master of the family felt bound to own that the place was pleasant, and except in the matter of certain

old associations, came off in his estimation most decidedly the conqueror in any comparison with the Park, in spite of the higher standing and superior dimensions of the old family mansion.

To the Misses Hatherley, also, there had been granted an amount of compensation for their reverses, in the ladies being permitted to settle down close to the scene of their former dignity. The three sisters had not thought this in the beginning. They had considered it a cruel aggravation of their having been compelled to quit the Park, and of its having been bought and occupied by others, that they must stay on in their low estate in the immediate vicinity, though all the while this staying on had been their own choice. For with the peculiar clinging local attachments which distinguish a large proportion of women and most cats, the Misses Hatherley had found it impossible to accept Christopher's suggestion, which he had pressed at the time, urged by the special bitterness in his own spirit, to accompany him to a new home at a distance from the old. The ladies had acted on a womanly instinct, not in deliberate worldly wisdom, remaining innocently unaware of the fact, even while they reaped the full benefit of their decision, that the family's staying on at Courtfield had been the very wisest step they could have taken under the circumstances, having regard to the idiosyncrasies of the women.

Twenty years had passed since the failure of the local bank which cost the Hatherleys the Park. Christopher, a young man of twenty-five when the disaster occurred, was now in his forty-sixth year. Ellen had been a little child in these days, yet the far-off lustre of the glories which had preceded that period still hung about and irradiated the Misses Hatherley in their own and their neighbours' estimation; nay, as distance lends enchantment to the view, distance of time had enabled the ladies to talk themselves into a settled belief, which was never put to an awkward test, unless when Christopher in his rugged truthfulness felt moved to deal a blow to it, repenting of his iconoclasm the next moment. This enthusiastic faith of his sisters, which never expressed itself in set terms, and took no distinct shape in the minds of the simple honourable maiden ladies, involved the conviction that the connection of the Hatherleys with the Park had been much longer in duration and closer in character than the facts of the case bore out. To hear Miss Phyllis or Miss Hatherley talk, you might have taken for granted—what they themselves had grown to believe devoutly, without any examination into the grounds of their belief—that the Hatherleys had come over with the Conqueror at the latest, and that they had been the liege lords and natural protectors of this corner of Warwickshire under the successive

dynasties of the Plantagenets, Tudors, and Stewarts down to the last reign. The truth was, the first alliance between the family and the Park had been made only two generations before, in the person of the grandfather for whose housekeeper the Cottage had been built. He had ousted an older lord of the soil in the plenitude of power which this particular Hatherley had wielded as head of the Addington bank. For the bank, longer than the Park with its not very numerous acres, had been the profitable inheritance of the race, until a protracted season of commercial disaster doomed many such banks; and the Addington one went down with the rest, bringing every evil save disgrace on the partners who had stuck to it to the last, and were ruined by its downfall.

But like most champions who are shaky on the foundation of their creeds, the Misses Hatherley were only the more fanatical and fervent in proportion to the intangibility of their articles of belief; and the brutal candour and precision in which Christopher, in spite of his general benevolence, now and then indulged, though it really did no great harm to the cloud castles, always shocked and wounded his elder sisters as a profane and parricidal outrage on the dignities and honours of their ancestors.

Anyhow the former connection of the Hatherleys with the Park had been venerable and

patriarchal, compared with the length and kind of reign of the present people. The squire of the Park, to tell the truth, had flourished in a wholesale warehouse in London City, certainly within the time of the present Hatherleys, and, to do them justice, Mr. and Mrs. Bellamy, though they had the reputation of being unimaginative and matter of fact, freely acknowledged the Misses Hatherley's position in the county, and treated them with the greatest consideration and respect. So the two families had always been on friendly terms, highly creditable—as Miss Phyllis considered—to the management and forbearance of the Hatherleys, and the modesty and good sense of the Bellamys.

Miss Hatherley, or Aunt Sophy, had been a well-portioned beauty in the old days, when the young ladies of the Park had ridden to meets and taken the upper places at county balls. As a beauty with a good dowry, Miss Hatherley had been kept up by her family, and had kept up herself, waiting for the right man who should offer fair equivalents for her undeniable advantages. But the right man did not come, and time passed, until the belle became outshone by the third sister, Phyllis. Miss Hatherley was already *passée* and sinking into the ranks of spinsterhood when the Addington bank failed, and included in the widespread distress the demolition of the prosperity of the Hatherleys. But

the eldest daughter of the house never forgot her original privileges, and demanded of all who approached her the deference due to her as the senior of the sisters.

Now that she was turned sixty, and there could be no concealing either from herself or others that she was far past her prime, she made the best of the years which had fled, and put them also to the right side of that debtor and creditor account which we all keep with our neighbours.

Naturally, perhaps, the *éclat* with which she had come out in society as Miss Hatherley of the Park, the admired of all admirers, the queen of county festivities, the great attraction of archery meetings, had spoilt Sophy Hatherley a little, and left her in her reverses a trifle opinionative and tart, since she had never been a woman of any largeness of mind or heart, or liberality of education; and she had been inclined from the first to resent any resistance to her sway in the fresh pretender which years had brought to her kingdom.

The second daughter, Anne, had never been one of her sister's rivals. Anne Hatherley was not beautiful, or wise, or witty. She was neither strong-minded nor strong-willed. She had always been big, fat, and good-tempered, with the superficial good temper which is not without its undercurrent of mulish obstinacy. She had never exacted any particular homage from her contem-

poraries. This was not in the light of the noble humility which lends the sweetness of the violet to some of the truest, bravest, most faithful natures the world ever saw. It was from an easy-minded absence of ambition, and a comfortable acquiescence in inferiority. Anne was rewarded by getting a fair share of general esteem, though it was a good deal dashed with scorn, simply in return for being seldom in anybody's way, for not proving contradictory or aggressive, and for possessing a considerable amount of rather lazy good-will to people at large. Anne Hatherley had no strong opinions, no warm partialities or prejudices—no angles. You might fall against her, metaphorically, without hurting yourself. Though Miss Anne was not intelligent, she had a certain faculty for management, which fitted her, after the official Park housekeeper had disappeared with the Park, to act as deputy housekeeper to the Cottage, and deputy lady bountiful to the village under the lynx-eyed supervision and paramount authority of her younger sister Phyllis.

Miss Phyllis was really a woman out of the common run. She was now considerably above forty years of age; but even when she was a girl of twenty her intelligence and energy had been far in advance of such qualities in her country contemporaries.

Unfortunately she had only a provincial field

of development, and that nearly quarter of a century ago. The intelligence had been largely self-taught, which signifies—unless with the very highest orders of intellect—a partial education tending to overweening self-confidence, and a spice of eccentricity. Her energy had frittered itself away in more or less petty channels, or else it had preyed on its possessor, producing restlessness, impatience, and a kind of domineering dogmatism in all her ways.

Miss Phyllis tried everything by turns, only went a certain length in any pursuit, and was thorough in none. Her self-will threatened to grow rampant, her high spirit waxed higher and higher, her temper became both capricious and hasty. Yet old friends, young people, children, servants, and the poor, while they stood decidedly in awe of Miss Phyllis, and some of them grumbled in loud asides at her interference and tyranny, liked her in spite of everything, believed in her, and applied to her in their troubles, with a faith which was not often disappointed. She made innumerable blunders in her rash imperious proceedings, for the purpose of benefiting Courtfield and the world. Some of these blunders she confessed with something of the frank grace and hearty penitence of her girlhood; others she doggedly ignored. But no ignorant failure ever shook her resolute determination to fight to the last against the wrong and for the right.

In æsthetics as in morals Miss Phyllis, with her half-taught, passionate craving for beauty, committed the wildest solecisms. She would never submit to a regular course of lessons from her younger brother, the art student Christopher, but set his teeth on edge by throwing off, in the course of an evening's work, chalk heads and water-colour flowers and landscapes, not without some signs of taste and spirit, while they were positively appalling in their daring transgressions against the laws of form, colour, and perspective. The horrors in wool work, wax work, and leather work, which came in turn, with triumphant speed, from Phyllis Hatherley's active hands, formed no small trial to her better-taught acquaintances and visitors, while the offences were looked upon by their author with more than parental complacency, by Miss Hatherley with really generous, condescending approval, by Miss Anne with mild elation and unreserved admiration. Phyllis had undergone no discipline in the course of her life which could have impressed on her to take time and pains with her performances. She leaped at conclusions; and though she was true as steel at heart, in the work of her hands she exaggerated grossly, and indulged in the most barefaced unprincipled addiction to shams.

Miss Phyllis had not remained single for the reasons which left her sisters spinsters. Miss Hatherley had not found the fitly endowed man

in time. Miss Anne had been overlooked by contemporary suitors. But Miss Phyllis, in the days when her candour and sweetness outweighed her pride and spirit, had loved with all the warmth of heart and frankness of temper which belonged to her nature, and there had been no lack of return where Miss Phyllis had freely given her fresh tender affections. But adversity and death had played their parts in her sad little love story. Her brilliant hopes had been blighted, her devoted heart had been wrung, and all the time she had kept her sorrows to herself with Spartan endurance. The tempest of tribulation had left her—not a worse woman surely, not soured, not selfish, but in some respects harder, and certainly more difficult to deal with.

In person Phyllis Hatherley was tall and big-boned like all the elder Hatherleys, though Sophy showed herself lean and Anne fat in their large framework. Phyllis, like Anne, was inclined to be stout, but it was stoutness kept in becoming subjection by an excitable temper and very active habits. She had a curiously small head for the size of her body, but it was a fine head phrenologically. She retained sufficient evidence of former good looks in the still silky wavy black hair, which she wore under the widely varying caps of her own rapid manufacture, in her dark brown eyes like Ellen's, and her handsome Roman nose full of character, though her

clear brunette complexion had grown sallow, and her chin was double. The chief attraction of her face, however, had always lain in its expressiveness and lively changes of reflected moods. In this light Miss Phyllis's face was in marked contrast to Miss Hatherley's, which, with its long regular features and a complexion that remained fresh at threescore, had a certain stony impassiveness about it which had lurked there in the days of its youthful beauty, and become fully developed by time. Miss Phyllis—born and bred lady as she was—though she was guilty of sundry flights of costume in the matter of trimmings, caps, collars and cuffs, and fancy aprons, emulated Miss Hatherley in scrupulous neatness and general suitability of dress. It was Miss Anne who now and then lapsed into untidiness and negligence on the one hand, and smart finery on the other, drawing down upon her the condemnation of both her sisters, and the special wrath of Miss Phyllis.

Even as a pretty bright baby, and still more as an eager independent child and girl, Phyllis had rebelled against her eldest sister's stiff, slow sententiousness, and had disputed public favour, and above all, family influence, with her—always more and more successfully.

Sophy Hatherley had never consented to being eclipsed—far less effaced; but though she and Phyllis with their contrasting temperaments came

into collision continually, and sometimes clashed together pretty sharply, Miss Hatherley had far too tenacious an idea of what was due to her own claims, while both sisters possessed too much religious principle and honest family affection to vex their little world by the sorry atmosphere of perpetual wrangling. But beginning at the Park and continuing at the Cottage, there was the state of things to which Alexander the Great objected when he had a mind to conquer the empire of Asia. There were two suns in the Courtfield sky, and two queens in the Hatherley household. For that matter there was a threatened danger of three female sovereigns. As the years went on, Ellen Hatherley grew more and more like what her Aunt Phyllis had been in her youth, and sided altogether with neither reigning dynasty, but betrayed symptoms of establishing one of her own. Already Anne Hatherley, who was fickle in her soft impressibility, gave faint signs of being seduced to the side of the heiress of her aunt's proud rule; so there was some fear of retribution reaching Miss Phyllis in her mature years, when she would see herself superseded in her turn by her niece in the old overstocked dominions. But to do everybody justice, no one deliberately either planned or dreaded such a consummation. Ellen in her impetuosity and in that mind of her own, which it is so hard to define or absolutely to prohibit

where reasonable, responsible human beings are concerned, did not dream for a moment of heading a conspiracy against the authority of the aunts who had brought her up. On the contrary, she would have contemplated with horror the feat of wresting the sceptre either from the clinging hand of Miss Hatherley, or the capable hand of Miss Phyllis. Ellen had loyal respect and grateful affection for her aunts. If she was their rival it was inadvertently and unconsciously.

Ellen Hatherley was the orphan daughter of one of the three Hatherley brothers. Her father had been the active partner in the bank, the fall of which he had not been able to prevent.

His unavailing efforts and the loss of the occupation of his life had been his two death-blows. Already his young wife had pre-deceased him, and his only child had been consigned to the care of his sisters. He took his misfortunes so to heart that he had, as he thought, nothing more to live for. He did not survive the year in which the panic and failure of the bank happened.

The brothers made of sterner stuff, who were left for the household of women to talk of, write to, and cling to, were Cuthbert, the eldest of the three, "the Young Squire" in the Park days, and Christopher, the youngest. Both were unmarried men. Cuthbert had accepted a clerkship in a mercantile house in Calcutta, and gone there the year after the crash. He had

risen to a junior partnership in what was so great a concern that a small slice implied considerable prosperity. He was understood to have done well ; but though he wrote short uncommunicative letters home at regular intervals, he had not said anything of returning to England. And he had certainly not sent to his family any more substantial proofs of his success than what were implied in the early days of his exile by the gifts of a shawl, stiff with embroidery, which Miss Hatherley immediately appropriated as her lawful spoil, though it was too heavy for her comfort, and too gorgeous for her taste, and a filigree necklace which had fallen to Ellen's share.

It was very different with Christopher, who, when he found it would be another wrench to his sisters' hearts to remove the ladies from the neighbourhood of the Park, remained with them at the Cottage, merely observing philosophically that a painter could paint anywhere, and need never be in want of subjects. If the man had an eye in his head, and a soul in his body, he would find a tuft of grass, the stump of a tree, any ragged urchin enough and too much for him.

As time proved Christopher's pictures to be unprofitable, in the sense of pounds, shillings, and pence, a difficulty might have arisen ; but if a drawing-master had no objection to walking two miles and back again in the mud of winter and the dust of summer, he was within a reason-

able distance by railway of large towns where his talent and knowledge were marketable. Then the school engagement in Birmingham turned up, and that care was removed.

Christopher's board to his sisters was such an important item in their income, that they would have been considerably pinched without it, for otherwise they were reduced to the interest of a small marriage portion their mother had brought with her, which had been settled on her daughters, and to a meagre board from Ellen, who had a tiny income of her own, derived from a similar source, since her mother also had possessed a very modest dowry.

The sisters accepted Christopher's contribution not very graciously, for they considered he ought to have been a great painter who might have made up to them in a small degree, by a fame and a fortune such as Sir Joshua's, for the loss of the Park ; and though they would not have allowed anybody save themselves to say it, they did think Christopher himself was somehow a good deal to blame for his collapse. Why would he muddle his brains with impossible aspirations and transcendental dreams ? Why would he not be practical and plain, so that the world might have a chance of understanding him ? He could not even paint the village farmhouse, Courtfield Grange, without making it as dim and washed out, with as misty a haze over it, and as queer figures to give the

canvas life—strange life—as if it were a bit of that stilted fantastic modern affectation called art needlework. Her uncle never “took” Ellen without contriving that her gowns should appear frightfully shabby and unbecoming, and her face the haggard ghost of itself, looking as if she had just seen another ghost, or was in one of her most contradictory and solemn moods.

Ellen, from her uncle’s brush, was like a vixen, or like a clergyman’s careworn wife doing honour to his worst sermon. Of course, nobody cared to have such landscapes, and no man or woman would elect to sit to such an artist.

It was hard upon Christopher’s relations; but as he could not be broken of his tricks, and was himself the greatest loser by them, his censors, chiefly Miss Phyllis, said, with an impatient sigh, the cross must be borne like other crosses. The worst of it was, that a foolish, hot-headed girl like Ellen should, now that she was grown up and had seen something, continue blind to her uncle’s mistakes, and should insist on encouraging him in them.

But on the whole the three sisters were all rather indulgent in a condescending affectionate way to Christopher’s failings. Miss Phyllis, at least, fought hotly for him when any one out of the family hinted at his failure in his profession, or attacked his weak points.

Still, though the Misses Hatherley admitted

among themselves that poor Chris was after all a good sort of fellow, and not a bad brother, it was the fate of the deceased John they lamented with pensive faces and tearful voices, and it was of the living Cuthbert who had allowed himself to drift almost beyond their knowledge, with his supposed triumph over obstacles, that the women thought and spoke with pride and pleasure.

CHAPTER V.

THE INDIAN LETTER.

ALL the Hatherley family in England were assembled one May evening in Christopher's attic studio. It was a rare gathering in such a place. Christopher was seldom called upon to turn out his womankind in a body.

Sometimes Miss Phyllis would come stamping in upon her brother with her quick active tread accentuated by a burning sense of wrong done, or treachery committed by one of her enemies, or one of her *protégés*—it did not matter much which. Then she would sit down and spread out her skirts—not without danger to Christopher's properties—appearing to fill the room with her presence, while she declaimed on what was engrossing her mind for the moment, to the obliterating and routing of Christopher's ideas.

Sometimes Ellen would enter, much as she had done years earlier, calling on Uncle Chris to hasten out and look at this sunset, or that rainbow, or bringing for his instant inspection acquisitions of no more value than a handful of withered

leaves. She would scatter the trophies about, take off her hat, perch herself as if for a long stay on the table, and only remember when it is too late, with unavailing remorse, that she had wasted a good half-hour of the waning light, which counted for something in the painter's scanty, hard-won leisure.

Christopher was more seldom favoured with calls from his sisters Sophy and Anne. Sophy made much of the stairs she had to mount on his account, and of the want of a comfortable chair for her to subside into after her fatigue. She expected him to indemnify her for these hardships by paying her such court as he was able.

As for Anne, she succeeded in accomplishing a far worse mess than Christopher himself ever produced, by bungling, inefficient, presently abandoned attempts to set his place and his paints in order.

But to-night all the ladies, old and young, were there. They had invaded the masculine territory with such expedition that Christopher, who had just walked in from Birmingham, had enjoyed no more time than sufficed for him to deposit the bulging portfolio he was wont to carry under his arm, on the table to which Ellen had already hoisted herself, and to place himself beside her, since the other seats were not enough for the elder ladies.

Miss Hatherley had taken the best, the stuffed

high-backed sitter's chair, with the fragment of tapestry hanging over it like an anti-macassar. Miss Phyllis had appropriated the second best, the strong cane chair, on which Christopher, heavy man as he was, could sit astride with his face to the back, and his folded arms resting on the upper bar, smoking meditatively; and there was no seat left for Miss Anne save a packing case, which had never contained any treasure of Christopher's, but, like several other disused and dilapidated articles, had been shoved and trundled unceremoniously out of the way into his room. Miss Anne had no objection to an Irish substitute for a chair. She accepted it with her usual easy content; she did not even mind the creaking of the *deals* which disturbed Christopher's nerves a good deal.

The explanation of the unanimous inroad spoke for itself in a letter on thin foreign paper, which Miss Hatherley held in her shrivelled fingers well covered with rings. But she felt that she as well as the letter ought to say something.

"Chris, here is an Indian letter from Cuthbert," she began with a self-evident announcement.

"Cuthbert is on his way home, you must know, Chris," broke in Miss Phyllis, who hated unnecessary preambles, and always liked to go straight to the heart of a subject. "We may begin to look for him to-morrow."

"Really, Phyllis, you run on so," remonstrated

Sophy, as if she were speaking to a forward girl. "You are positively misleading Chris. What Cuthbert says is this——"

But Chris had his own oar to put in. He was entitled to express his feelings on the subject of his brother's return without waiting for Sophy's going at a snail's pace through the details.

"Is Cuddie coming back at last?" he exclaimed half incredulously. "Well, then, tell us all about it."

But the thread of what Miss Hatherley had meant to be her deliberate communication was broken; besides, she was offended by the serious liberties which had been taken with her. "Upon my word, Christopher, I think you might have got rid of that ridiculous abbreviation of a name by this time," she said pettishly. "And I am not so bent on being your informant as to read out the letter while you nurse your knee and bid me go on. It will be 'fire away' next, in that free and easy manner. I have not been accustomed to be treated so cavalierly."

"I beg your pardon, my dear Sophy," said Christopher, dropping the caressed leg, "but what should I call Cuddie?"

"I should say, at his age, Cuthbert was his due," said Miss Hatherley, drawing herself up. "But if you will contract or corrupt Cuthbert why don't you say Bertie, which is a civilised familiarity?"

“Because I should not know the old donkey—I mean fellow—under that disguise of his baptismal title. In addition, I abominate Bertie—a sentimental soft-sawdery shortening or lengthening of a name which has no clear source. It may stand for Herbert, or Albert, or Robert, or, according to what you say just now, Cuthbert. Imagine a by-name which has no distinct origin! To return to our mutton, I never called you Sophia, though you are the eldest of the family, and by your own definition more entitled to your full name than Cuthbert can be. Neither should I think of converting Sophy into Fia, though there may be such a version of wisdom, and it may come into fashion presently.”

“Cuthbert was to sail on the 20th of last month,” said Miss Phyllis, again ignoring words wide of the mark; “he may come any day.”

“Has his health begun to suffer?” inquired Christopher, regarding and tenderly tapping his dusty boot where the leather was giving way, “or does his firm send him on their business to England?”

“He does not say so to me,” replied Miss Hatherley with renewed importance. She was the correspondent to whom Cuthbert had written. She had first opened and read and remained to this moment in possession of the letter which contained the great news that had excited all the commotion. “He states with brevity,” re-

sumed Miss Hatherley, who was a little pedantic in speech.

"With precious brevity!" muttered Christopher half aloud.

"There was no occasion for a man's writing a folio to Sophy to announce his arrival, which might be as soon as his letter," cried Phyllis. "We may hear everything from his own mouth before the week is over."

"As we might have read in any book of travel—when Calcutta was sufficiently out of the way to be worth travelling to—all that it concerned us to know about punkahs and mulligatawney for the last fifteen or twenty years," remarked Christopher, stretching out his hand for a paint tube and beginning to open it.

"Christopher," protested Miss Phyllis indignantly, "are you such an unnatural wretch that you will not rejoice to receive back your own brother safe and sound after all these years of banishment and toil?"

"You are forgetting the main point of the parable, Phyllis," her brother remonstrated. "It is not the prodigal, but the elder brother who is returning. Considering that he has never covered quite a sheet of his paper to me all these years, and I dare say did not trouble himself to read half of the effusions which, of course, I have poured forth to him, it is unreasonable to expect me to fall into ecstasies at the too blissful prospect of

his unaccountably turning up again at this date. As to banishment and toil, the banishment was self-chosen, and so I conclude was the toil to serve his own purposes. Anne, if you do not take care that box will give way, and I will not insure you from disagreeable consequences."

"Oh! I don't mind," said Anne with perfect equanimity. "But really I think if Cuthbert is to arrive any day, it is high time we were making preparations for him; of course, he will have the spare room, but it is sure to want alterations, and it had better be aired at once. If you will show me, Phyllis, what you think, I shall set Kitty to put everything to rights immediately."

Miss Phyllis did not like to be anticipated, though she rose in response to the suggestion. "He cannot have the chintz room," she said decisively, "it looks to the north, and the chimney smokes. You forget how long Cuthbert has been in a warm climate. He will have my room," with a cutting glance at Christopher, as if he did not sleep from choice in the worst room in the house, the attic adjoining his studio, an apartment utterly unsuited for a sojourner in the plains of Hindostan, not to say for a probable nabob. "I shall transfer my goods in a jiffy," announced Phyllis, who had as decided a preference for pithy colloquialisms and strong language as Miss Hatherley showed for Johnsonian phrases, so sounding as to be all sound.

"Oh, Phyllis, how will you manage it?" exclaimed Miss Anne with round eyes, shaken out of her stolidity by the extent of the sacrifice.

"I'll soon let you see. I should be a poor creature if I could not accommodate myself to circumstances," cried Miss Phyllis with a fine scorn. "I could shake myself and my belongings down into any decent dog-hole in a trice. But come along, it is well somebody should be getting ready a welcome for Cuthbert," darting another keenly reproachful glance from her dark brown eyes at Christopher.

Sophy got up also. "Phyllis is so hasty," she complained, looking after the retreating figures of her sisters, Anne putting force on her leisurely, rather shuffling gait to keep up with Phyllis's quick firm tread. "She might have consulted me where Cuthbert had better be put, though it is true, in general, I leave all these household matters to her and Anne." Miss Hatherley vindicated her dignity by graciously giving the explanation, even to such intimate relations as Christopher and Ellen. "As you are rather draughty up here, Chris, you must really excuse me for not staying with you any longer." Miss Hatherley with a little shiver bowed herself out, as it were, sailing over the attic floor with slow propriety. Ellen, who had been unusually silent, was left alone with her uncle on their tribune of a table.

Christopher looked rather ruefully after his sisters. "I am afraid I have vexed your aunts a bit, Ellen," he confessed, "by not making so much of their great news as they expected. A man always puts his clumsy foot in it."

"But how could you be enthusiastic at the thought of Uncle Cuthbert's return," protested Ellen warmly, "when he went away and left the heaviest load on your shoulders? What should we have done without you all these years, Uncle Chris? And in the meantime I dare say Uncle Cuthbert has been enjoying himself, making merry, and dining with governors and generals, and supping with native princes," added Ellen in delightful disregard of the rules of courts and the restrictions of castes, "forgetting all about us poor people at home."

"There!" exclaimed Christopher, "I have put my foot in it far worse than I expected. I have poisoned your mind, young woman, stuffed it with erroneous ideas, led you to suppose I am not pleased to come face to face with my own father's and mother's son, and altogether given you quite a false impression of your uncle Cuthbert. Old Cuddie was not half a bad fellow, dry-haired, and fond of his own way like some of the rest of us I grant you, but quite capable of doing a handsome thing when it was pointed out to him, and of behaving like a lamb when you stroked him in the right direction."

"Uncle Chris," said Ellen gravely, "I have always thought you a truthful and honest man. I do not wish to sit in judgment on my elders. Still, facts are stubborn things, and ought to be faced. It would do no good to indulge in a delusion. Was it kind in Uncle Cuthbert to stay away all these years from his family, and merely 'advise' them in mercantile jargon that he was alive? Was it brotherly to abstain from sharing the least part of such good things as he has won with his nearest kindred?"

"Perhaps he contemplated having nearer kindred still; perhaps he contemplates it to this day," said Christopher evasively. "He isn't an old man; it is an insult to me to think it. He is not more than forty-eight, and I am forty-five, with a name and a fortune to make yet, in defiance of the tag end of the rubbish. 'If a man is not rich at forty, he will never be rich;' as if Defoe did not write Robinson Crusoe, and Il Francia paint his masterpiece long after they were forty! Why Etty must not have been far short of the grand climacteric when he compelled the R.A.'s to look about and see the man they had been sitting on all these years. Perhaps your uncle Cuthbert has married without telling us, and is bringing home an unknown wife and family, for whom Phyllis and Anne will have to find accommodation. I am not sure but that, after the first shock, Phyllis would rather like the

strain on her resources. But it would be the death of your poor aunt Sophy if the lady had diluted black blood in her veins. and were to prove a fright unversed in the ways of society. Cuthbert was so close and cautious that he was sure to be taken in when he married."

"You have not answered my question, Uncle Chris."

"Then I will answer it instantly," said Christopher, leaping down from the table and speaking with determination as he went over to his easel and stood looking at his half-finished picture. "Your uncle Cuthbert forgot us, but it was sheer forgetfulness. Neither did he altogether understand the situation. He could not guess the requirements of others—especially of women. He is one of those men who fancy women are well off if they have a roof over their heads, with sufficient food and clothing, and who have a general notion that they can live and be happy in their own way on next to nothing by way of income. He is not an imaginative or sympathetic man, but neither is he intentionally unjust or unkind. You must be fair to Cuthbert."

Ellen got off the table in her turn without giving her uncle time to help her down, came round and stood beside him, clasping her hands behind her back in a quaint reflection of his attitude, and looking at his picture with him.

The picture was the representation of some

fugitives who fled along a rocky pass. It was probably historical. It might indicate the Jews who forsook Jerusalem in time to escape the vengeance of the Romans. It might be a party of the Albigenses or the Waldenses who had recourse to the serried heights of the neighbouring mountains to meet death by cold and hunger rather than from priestly persecution. It might be the stragglers of the clan Macdonald, against whom Lord Stair issued his warrant of state, whose guests rose in the dead of night to massacre their hosts.

The picture was only sketched in, and, to tell the truth, Christopher's figures, even after they had the advantage of the last finishing touches, were by no means so chronologically accurate with regard to type and costume as to render them unmistakable. But there was one thing it was impossible to blunder over: they were fugitives with wild woe in their faces and gestures, and at the same time with that last unhesitating appeal to heaven which lends a strange unearthly grandeur to the piteous humiliation of righteous or wronged men.

In the same manner Ellen was sure the wan sky above the fugitives and the dark track before them, when they were further painted in, though they might be faint or blurred, would still be full of tender commiseration in the one case, and of awful relentlessness in the other.

Ellen was familiar with Christopher's pictures. She held the key to them—if only others could hold it also!—if but the faintest utterances of the tragedy and the half-stifled articulation of the comedy could have penetrated the dull souls of art critics and the world's!

"Uncle Chris," said Ellen, suddenly breaking the silence, "if you had been able to go to Rome twenty years ago, as you intended, could you have worked out your thoughts with greater freedom and power than you express them now?"

Christopher shrugged his shoulders. "How can I, of all people, tell you that?" he demanded a little impatiently. "Very likely not. I had advantages in my day, many more at first than Newbould commanded. Yet you see how soon he improved his, into training his eye and hand to obey his brain unerringly, while mine lack fidelity, and go miscalculating, faltering to this day, probably always will. There are some men born to be duffers—my sort of duffer. Are you up to the particular classification? A man who attempts a thing he never can accomplish, a bombastic ass who, with solemn pomposity and deadly dulness, talks high art, labouring away at a conqueror's car when he cannot paint a costermonger's wheelbarrow—not that there may not be higher art in the last than in the first; an impracticable idiot who has quarrelled with his bread-and-butter all his life, and though he was

never fit for even so much, would not put himself in the way of learning to paint pot-boilers, but would starve, and snarl, and stick to his conceited folly, which he calls conscientious. I am afraid Cuthbert will be of that opinion. Poor old beggar! he always was matter of fact, disposed to look at the £ s. d. side, and inclined to come down like thunder on the insanity, impudence, and general profligacy and hypocrisy of anybody who differed from him. There—but I have no more time for generic terms and idle speculations. Bundle yourself off, pack up, cease to favour me with your company, young lady. I did hope that I should have been half through with my meal by this time, and still able to distinguish blues from greens for a good hour to come. I had such a vision in my mind, as I walked along, of having just hit on the proper tone for that old man's mantle and this crone's pinafore. Do old women never wear pinafores? Never mind, don't giggle—it ain't good manners, Aunt Sophy will tell you—and be off with you," said Christopher, who had contrived to choke down a sigh of regret at his vanished vision in a good pretence at gaiety.

CHAPTER VI.

THE YOUNG SQUIRE'S RETURN.

BY the following morning Miss Phyllis's zeal and inventive faculties had advanced "with leaps and bounds" until they threatened to outstrip her discretion considerably. It was not enough to vacate the room she had occupied ever since she came to the Cottage, and which she had crammed with all the tools and materials of all her crafts, and all the books of all her clubs, in addition to her large heterogeneous stock of wearing apparel. It was not sufficient to turn the house upside down, for Cuthbert's proper reception, to nettle Sophy, worry Anne—difficult as the last operation was—to fret Ellen, and almost drive the servants to distraction. Miss Phyllis had bethought herself of Cuthbert's original position as the young squire and heir of the Park, and decreed that he ought to have a semi-public as well as a private welcome.

It was in vain that Christopher growled his opposition, and made Ellen—who had been foolishly tempted by a spice of sentiment and picturesque-

ness in the proceeding—see its incongruity and absurdity. “The young squire has cut his wisdom teeth,” Christopher reminded his sisters, “even if he would not have abjured such weak vanities when he was in long clothes. He has not been ‘the young squire’ for an age. It is a trespass on the rights of the Bellamys to give him such an idiotic title.”

Unfortunately Miss Phyllis's crotchet was in accordance, on this occasion, with the inclinations of her sisters. The village was to a considerable extent under her influence, and the season was the flowery month of May. By the hour of Christopher's return from Birmingham on the second afternoon, he had to walk with sundry private groans under a couple of arches, well advanced towards completion, composed of cowslips and bluebells, lilac and May.

They were not bad attempts at floral decoration. Phyllis was a host in herself in contriving and bringing to pass what she had a mind to do, when she did not venture on ground where training was required. She must have had willing scouts rifling the fields and woods the previous evening; and by dawn of day she must have laboured with her own hands for many hours at weaving the wreaths and covering the framework, as she toiled in the church before Christmas and Easter. Christopher felt bound to admit the considerable merit and surprising energy of

the work, as he came in view of one bow after another, the first spanning the entrance to the village where the road narrowed conveniently between a projecting gable and the wheelwright's shed, the last a few feet in advance of the modest wicket-gate leading into the Cottage garden.

But Christopher's common sense as a man got the better of his painter's eye and his brotherly admiration of Phyllis's enterprise.

"It is to be hoped luck may befall us this time, though we are not what is counted a lucky family in general, and that Cuthbert will arrive under cloud of night," he said to himself.

The Hatherleys were fortunate for once in their lives. Cuthbert took them by surprise, after all, by driving up in a fly from the railway station in the dusk of the same evening. Stoutier than Christopher, if not so tall, with a shade of unwieldiness, though it was only a shade as yet, in his girth and weight, he showed a stoop acquired by bending over a desk in a sedentary life. The grizzled hair and beard about a face the most conspicuous features of which had always been the strong jaw and the overhanging brows—peculiarities increased by years—the complexion always dark, bronzed now to swarthinness, left not a trace that could warrant the title of "the Young Squire."

There had been a waste of uncompleted wreaths, an idle expenditure of imagination. Phyllis had

fancied a quick gathering of villagers—women and children mostly. For even she could not go so far as to expect a crowd of county people to turn out, or a regiment of volunteers with their band to march up and keep the way, and a speech to be delivered by some county magnate—the member, if not the Lord Lieutenant. Still she had counted on a little shrill hurraing, the scattering of pence and small silver as at a wedding, and if the vicar had been within hail he might have improved the occasion by saying a few appropriate words. All this had to be relinquished in spite of Miss Phyllis's strenuous efforts to take time by the forelock. However, every minor loss was forgotten in the flutter and agitation of the sudden arrival, though the household had got fully forty-eight hours' warning—more than enough according to the ideas of the guest whom they had been delighting to honour. For the moment everybody was occupied with the puzzle and wonder, as well as the joy and thanksgiving, with revived recollections and new impressions, with lurking disappointment and vague pain as the question went silently round among the elder women—whether Cuthbert had always been as abrupt and undemonstrative as he now showed himself. Barely kissing his sisters, forgetting to kiss his niece, and suffering rather than returning the grasp of Christopher's hand, he sat down, made a short remark on the evening's being

chilly (the rest of the company had thought it delightfully warm for the season), and asked if anybody would like to see the *Evening Standard* or the *Echo*, pulling both from his pocket. It was clear he thought he had done every duty which restoration to his country and kindred required of him, and desired to be let alone and not bothered with exclamations and interrogations. Not that he was either overcome by his feelings or struggling to restrain them. This cool, stiff-mannered, gruff man kept his feelings so well in hand, that one was tempted to doubt whether he had many feelings to trouble himself about. Ellen was at once incredulous on this point, sitting, it is to be feared, in the seat of the scorner, certainly in that of the rash dogmatic judge.

There was a little pause, and then when Miss Anne, whose accommodating qualities did not include the slightest tact or penetration, was about to allude with a smile to the unfinished arches, and ask if there had been light enough for the traveller to see and admire them even half made, Cuthbert broke the silence with a discomfiting remark, "Do the folks here still keep old style? I was under the impression that they had adopted the new, long before my father's time, but I must have been wrong, since they still play 'Jack-in-the-green' in the middle of May. I saw some signs of the old tomfoolery as

I drove in. The world must take a long time to grow up in some corners of England."

Even Miss Anne was silent at this speech, and Christopher changed the subject rapidly, beginning to tell his brother of some local changes, as kindred who have drifted far apart, and retain few private interests in common, will quickly and instinctively feign a share in more public interests to fill up the sense of a void both in speech and heart.

Not that Cuthbert feigned much. He had always been blunt and sincere. His replies to Christopher's obliging communications frequently did not extend beyond a monosyllable, a humph, or a nod, while even his chary demands for explanations betrayed a large amount of unconcealed forgetfulness of past landmarks, county and vestry politics, old neighbours and their affairs.

One observation which Cuthbert chanced to let fall almost tempted the elder ladies to a simultaneous outcry.

Christopher had occasion to allude to the Bellamys.

"Is Bellamy still at the Park?" in a tone of careless wonder. "I am surprised that he has not long ago found a better investment for his money than the old barrack with its few fields."

And it was only that morning the sisters had been saying to each other what a pity it was the

Park was not for sale, in which case Cuthbert, if he had accumulated a large fortune, might have bought back the ancestral inheritance like the hero of a novel!

But there was no outcry. Though the sisters had been in the habit of speaking their minds freely to Christopher on trifling grounds of difference, the ladies did not dispute this extreme heresy of Cuthbert's. He was the sort of man who controls without effort, by a sort of fascination, many women, to whose authority, coolly asserted, they yield without opposition, whose decrees they accept without remonstrance. The Misses Hatherley had half forgotten that Cuthbert, when he was the "Young Squire," had ruled them very much as an absolute monarch, even though he was only the heir apparent.

They were all his seniors, and a number of years had passed since the brother and sisters had parted, and since the women had been under the man's sway; but they returned immediately to their allegiance.

It was strange enough to see how Miss Phyllis followed suit with her sisters. She only hesitated for a moment with something like a pant of her breast, and a flash of her dark eyes, as if there was a second's doubt in her mind whether Cuthbert were her lord and king—whether he were even the gallant, victorious, true-hearted conqueror of adversity, she had persisted in

believing him, or a cold-hearted, time-serving, churlish man, inclined to play the tyrant, without a shadow of right, the first time he had the opportunity.

The balance of Miss Phyllis's mind was only disturbed for an instant; the next the eager, impulsive, passionate woman reverted as surely as the martinet Sophy, or the clumsy Epicurean philosopher Anne, to the acknowledgment of the natural supremacy of the cool, firm, taciturn man. It was one thing not to subjugate, but to tyrannize sometimes, in a friendly spirit, over Christopher, and another to contradict Cuthbert. And when Miss Phyllis gave anything, she gave all; she was not capable of calling any man master, and at the same time railing at him, or picking holes in his coat, in the secret chambers of her heart. Cuthbert had but tottered on his pedestal; he was reinstated, without the slightest injury, to his place as Miss Phyllis's model of a fine, stately, commanding man who should be obeyed. He might be a little spoilt by his contact with the world, especially the cringing, salaaming Eastern world. He might have become a little hard or odd, or possibly—curious to say—revolutionary in some of his notions; but that was only saying he was fallible. He remained the undisturbed head of the house, and Miss Phyllis would be the first to bend her proud neck once more to the yoke.

Ellen was the one woman in the house who was not spell-bound by Cuthbert's dominant eye and prevailing voice. The very maidservants scuttled about to obey his laconic orders, and plumed themselves on his "thank you," while their liking for Christopher, who had sunk in one night from "Mr. Hatherley" to "Mr. Christopher" on the lips of both high and low, had never induced them to do more than dawdle over the fulfilment of his requests—an amount of attention for which he was grateful, far beyond the deserts of the bestowers. Only Ellen in her unshaken devotion to Uncle Chris, and her anger at seeing him superseded in the comparatively small allowance of rule and dignity with which he had been invested, declined to pay homage to the new old autocrat, and was snubbed by her aunts for being flippant in her conversation before him. Yet she had not the comfort of believing that he either noticed or resented the rebellion when she was actually—with deep design and resentful boldness—speaking at him for his personal benefit.

Christopher saw what Ellen was about, shook his head surreptitiously at her, and scolded her in private, almost as sharply as two of her aunts did, and all the time she was forced to recognise that such a petty revolt as she could institute was utterly beneath her uncle Cuthbert's regard.

Early in the morning of the day succeeding

that of Cuthbert's arrival, every vestige of the arches which had been erected for his and his family's glorification was removed, and not the most distant allusion to the public reception which had been intended for him was ever dropped in his hearing. Cuthbert Hatherley took possession of his sister Phyllis's room without so much as knowing that he was ousting its former owner. Phyllis had too much delicacy to mention the sacrifice, even if she had thought it worth mentioning where the head of the house was concerned. No one else save Ellen looked upon the transfer in that light, or would have used the liberty of alluding to it in the new occupant's presence, and Ellen was under the necessity of paying heed to her aunt's express prohibitions. Christopher forgot all about the circumstance, like a man, engrossed as he was, too, with his picture, which Cuthbert, when he paid a short visit to the attic studio, looked at for a brief space, then whistled one bar of a tune, and walked away without a remark.

Christopher, who had all the quick intuitions and abundant sympathy and imagination in which his brother was wholly deficient, was as conversant with Cuthbert's thoughts on the subject as if he had put them into so many words.

“His head will be in the clouds to the end of the chapter. A possessed dreamer who cannot even

expound his dream or vision, or whatever he likes to call it. Why doesn't he paint honest, respectable corn-fields and coppices, or flesh and blood such as they are? Poor Kit! he had better have broken stones by a roadside. But he keeps himself, I suppose, with these drawing lessons, and every man is free to follow his own course. Let us be thankful there is no call for me to interfere, since Kit was always as obstinate as a mule."

CHAPTER VII.

ELLEN TRANSPLANTED.

ELLEN HATHERLEY was hot-headed, and afflicted with vehement partialities and prejudices, but she did not prove impervious to reason and a fair amount of evidence. She soon owned that her uncle Cuthbert had redeeming points. He submitted indeed to be treated like the Great Mogul; he never troubled to inquire whether the well-seasoned room—doubly and trebly fitted up with shelves and cupboards—had stood vacant awaiting his arrival; he never stopped to ask—before he told the servant to pile another shovel of coals on the drawing-room fire, on an evening when the nightingale was singing in the nearest lane—whether his sisters, as they fanned themselves behind his broad back, might not faint or deteriorate into jellies under the oppression; he did not observe, or at least act on the observation, that Christopher, coming in fagged from his journey and drudging task, would back his chair to the door or window, and wipe his forehead, before he could swallow a morsel. Yet,

in spite of all, Cuthbert did not show himself an aggressive tyrant. He meddled with nobody. He was precise and regular in his habits, but he did not impose either the precision and regularity, or the habits, on other people. On the contrary, when he found that the late family dinner, which had been immediately resuscitated on his account, interfered with Christopher's painting, Cuthbert desired, and his desires were equivalent to laws, that the household should resume its old practice on this point, with the addition of a little dinner served to him in his own room. He might be inflexible, but he was not fussy, or interfering, or guilty of petty exactions, not to say cruel injuries.

Ellen was driven to see for herself that her uncle Cuthbert was a just man, as her uncle Christopher had said he was. She had no sooner granted so much than she was impelled to admit, further, that he might have a generosity of his own, notwithstanding the negligence and obnoxiousness of all these years. Miss Anne, who was garrulous, had happened, without any ulterior motive, to let out in a *tête-à-tête* conversation, or rather a monologue, which she had poured forth to her eldest brother one day when there was nobody in the room save these two and Ellen, some of the numerous shifts to which gentlewomen with small incomes are reduced to make both ends meet. Only Sophy, who was the eldest and the

least strong of the sisters, had a fire in her room during the severest nights in winter.

Phyllis dyed, sponged, and restored, like a dealer in second-hand clothes, all the ladies' silk gowns, till they wore the time of two gowns. Even Ellen had no new dress for the Bellamys' ball last Christmas, but had to content herself with an old Indian muslin which had belonged to her mother. To be sure, Ellen and her aunt Phyllis had succeeded so well in trimming the gown with clusters of natural chrysanthemums, that it was one of the most admired costumes in the room.

She, Anne, had learned to drink beer instead of Madeira at lunch.

The brother had listened passively, as if tolerably bored with these details. But the very next day he had gone to the new bank at Addington, and deposited there, in his sisters' name, so liberal a sum of money, that it sounded fabulous in their grateful ears. But how much more tenderly affectionate and thoughtfully mindful it would have been if he had sent a little of it home, at intervals, in the course of the latter part of his exile—if he had even brought back gifts more individual in their application than the ivory chess-men, silver pagoda, china plates and bowls, and tiger-skins! The sisters were apt to bring these forward, with something like fidgety ostentation, when visitors breathed a word of the

Oriental treasures with which residents in the rich East are wont to load themselves to excess, in the contemplation of their return to the kindred they are minded to endow. As for Ellen, she felt glad that Cuthbert had brought home no bangles or chains, like the old filigree necklace, which her aunts might have insisted were suitable for her acceptance.

But although Ellen had been brought to this modified judgment of her kinsman, she felt shocked, scandalised, and overwhelmed—to the verge of despair, and to the brink of violent rebellion this time—by the next step of Cuthbert Hatherley, together with its consequences. With the mingled promptitude and reticence characteristic of the man, he bought suddenly, without consulting anybody, without even naming his intention—not the Park, which was not in the market—but Brasbœuf, also in the neighbourhood of Courtfield, a finer place, with a larger estate in connection with it, as well as with a Norman-French name. He told his family—taken by surprise—in a casual way, of the purchase, adding that he was going to set up house in the course of a few weeks, and proposed that his niece Ellen should keep house for him.

It was bad enough that Cuthbert could have the coolness—Ellen had almost said the audacity—to contemplate such a proceeding on her part, as that she should quit the only home she had

ever known, and leave the relations who had taken her in and brought her up with the utmost solicitude for her welfare—who had spoilt her, as her uncle Chris occasionally pretended — and that she should make this change to suit the convenience of an uncle whom she had hardly a recollection of having seen till within the last month, and who had not thought about her during all these years. It was still worse, an absolute insult, for Cuthbert to imagine she would agree to being promoted over her aunts' heads, and it was wounding the victim to the quick, in the tenderest region of her heart, to believe she could ever prefer her uncle Cuthbert to her uncle Chris; desert her oldest, truest, kindest friend in his simplicity and obscurity, to dwell with Cuthbert, whatever might be the state and splendour he meant to establish at Brasbœuf.

It hurt and offended Ellen to find her aunts all three unite in chorus to exalt Ellen's good fortune. It needed, indeed, an effort for them to recover from the shock inflicted on them; and there was an inevitable recoil from Cuthbert's want of confidence in them, as well as some fleeting mortification and regret—which had more to do with the past than the present—that their brother had not come home sooner, and restored one of his sisters at least to a position equal to—none would own it was higher than—the old family life at the Park. But they never hinted that the offer

might be rejected ; they only called her a foolish ungrateful girl for making any objections, or raising a single obstacle to going with her uncle Cuthbert wherever he chose, the moment he asked her to accompany him.

"I suppose it would have been all the same if he had proposed to me to return to India with him to-morrow," Ellen said to herself indignantly.

But it went far to break Ellen's heart—that youthful heart so quick to be broken and to be mended again—when Christopher himself, unworldly, impracticable, kindly affectioned Uncle Chris, delivered the same verdict unflinchingly as to the side on which duty lay, though he sighed in the middle of his decision, and of the joke which he was so ready to get up to laugh away the sigh.

He said there was not a doubt Ellen must go and sit at the head of her uncle Cuthbert's table, and feed on a stalled ox, abandoning her other uncles and her aunts to a dinner of herbs, which was a figure of speech ; for Phyllis had not yet taken up the vegetarian system.

Ellen was not in the slightest degree propitiated by the fact that Cuthbert had chosen her to be the mistress of Brasbœuf. In truth there was not a grain of flattery in it. Cuthbert had conferred the appointment on the principle of

natural selection. His sister Sophy was too old for the post which was vacant. Again, Sophy would never manage at the Cottage without one of her sisters, and Cuthbert knew of old that Anne was lost without Phyllis. Upon the whole, Ellen was the fittest member of the household to undergo a change—not merely of place, but in some degree of position. She was the young member of the family, while she was also grown up; and he had no doubt his sisters had reared her for a woman's natural office—the management of a house, with the control of servants—if not, she could learn; experience proved always the best teacher.

His sisters, as Cuthbert did not fail to recognise, were as much ladies at the Cottage as they had been at the Park. But his niece, who had not, unless as a baby, known the higher, wider sphere, with the greater consideration it commanded, might, without any fault of hers, gradually sink into a lower circle, with pettier, meaner interests and an inferior tone, if she were not speedily transferred to better soil. Though she was of course useful to her aunts, and her presence rendered the house livelier for them, and though, equally of course, Christopher made a fool of himself with her, it was doing a good thing for the girl to take her to Brasbœuf, and let her mix on terms of greater equality with the families in the country houses round, and have the chance of

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a satisfactory settlement in life, though that might deprive Cuthbert of his housekeeper, just when she had become of value to him.

It was Christopher who, though he had wounded Ellen keenly, not only succeeded in drawing the poison from the wound, but brought her to a more dutiful frame of mind, and scattered to the winds her desperate determination rather—if her relations in the Cottage would keep her no longer—to go out into the strange unheeding world, eking out her slender income by working for her living, than live at ease in nominal presidency over Cuthbert Hatherley's establishment.

"It is hard, Uncle Chris," complained Ellen, speaking with small spasmodic chokes and gushes of breath and words. She was too high-spirited a girl to cry readily and openly, and at this moment she would have died rather than cried to the man who had wrung her heart, though he was her hero Christopher Hatherley, with whom she was closeted in his studio. "Nobody cares enough for me, it seems, to wish to keep me with them," said Ellen, too miserable to be mindful of her grammar. "I knew, of course, that my own father and mother were gone, and that aunts and uncles, even the best of them, I suppose, were not quite like fathers and mothers. I knew that I was useless in a great measure so long as Aunt Phyllis and Aunt Anne were as able-bodied as I am, while Aunt Phyllis is a great deal stronger-

mined and more indefatigable—*she* never falters and flags—still I did think——”

“Don’t be a goose, Ellen,” said Christopher, really more crustily than Cuthbert ever spoke. “You know perfectly well we shall all miss you very much. I don’t know how I shall get on without you. The maids will make a mess of my properties. My models will take French leave. Nobody will ever try to read what Phyllis calls my riddles of pictures. But for all that, you are plainly bound to give your cheerful consent to your uncle Cuthbert’s proposal, and to make him a good and happy young housekeeper and companion. I declare, Ellen, that sounds like an advertisement of the article in the columns of a newspaper.”

Ellen would not smile. “What do I owe to Uncle Cuthbert that I should sacrifice myself—I don’t think *now*,” with a marked emphasis on the now, “that I am sacrificing any other body—to him?” She put the gist of the matter dismally before Christopher.

“My dear Ellen, whatever you may think of being—and girls have odd fancies sometimes—to oblige me, don’t be cynical. Don’t give yourself out as a misunderstood, an unappreciated, if not a blighted being. We are all fond enough of you—Sophy when she finds most fault with your carriage; Phyllis when she rates you soundly for stupidity in running her errands—which, not

possessing as many feet as Briareus had hands, she must sometimes submit to have done by deputy; I myself, when I scowl fiendishly at your frightful mistakes in your conceited attempts to rub down my colours, turn you out of the room, and lock the door upon you. But I am afraid you are a goose beyond remedy, and a perverse, an inconsiderate goose to boot, if you are not able to see that you have binding obligations, which if you are wise, good, and even moderately sweet, you will fulfil carefully to Cuthbert. Come, I shall repeat them to you, though you are such a goose that my exertions to open your eyes will probably be of little use. Cuthbert is your father's elder brother—you won't dispute that, though you may be quick enough to add, no thanks to him for it. He is the head of the family, as Phyllis says with such solemn satisfaction. He has shown himself so by doing something which I could never accomplish. Ellen, have you no gratitude to him for smoothing your aunts' path in life, and rendering their old age more secure? It has been a load on my mind all these years, what would become of them and you if I died as John, your father, died, and left you with your bare pittance. I have often been tempted to question whether it was not grossly wrong and selfish in me, after all, to go on cherishing the long-deferred, forlorn hope of painting anything worth preserving, when I ought to have

removed to Birmingham or some other big horror of a town, taken more pupils, and given up my whole time to making and saving a little money, so as to lay by a store for a rainy day."

"Oh, Uncle Chris, how could you ever propose to do such a thing, you who have done and borne so much already?" protested Ellen passionately. "Especially how could you waste a thought upon me, when you know that I would gladly teach, or turn cook or housemaid, or field-worker—do anything horrid—if I could help you to secure leisure to become still more—what you were born to be—a painter."

"As to being born a painter, I am not so sure as I have been; I am often inclined to doubt it," said Christopher with a wistful, far-away look in his grey eyes. "But what you could not have done, any more than I could—to insure ample provision for your aunts, without giving up altogether painting for my own hand—Cuthbert has managed to do. 'Too late,' do I hear you say? No, nothing is too late, and better late than never. Show some generosity, magnanimity, and faith, child. Take the goods the gods send you in their own time and way, and be heartily, humbly thankful for them. Yes, I am freer to paint than I have been for many a day, though I have no intention of becoming a pensioner on old Cuddie's bounty, but mean to continue my attendance at the Brummagem

school till I paint the great picture, Ellen, when commissions will pour in upon me, and millionaires offer me their weight in gold to supply facsimiles of their charming physiognomies. Cuthbert has bestowed a huger boon upon me than he suspects even remotely. But you know, and will you not help me to repay the service?"

"If you put it in that way," said Ellen, hesitating, and still half offended.

"And I have yet another way to put it in," said Christopher briskly. "Poor Cuthbert has been away from us all these years. He was never a very expansive mortal, and he has been thrown in upon himself, and has grown ten times more rigid, frozen, and crusted over. You must help to soften him, to free him, in turn, from the overgrowth of absorption in business, together with the absence of every family tie. Then, apart from your duty, Brasbœuf is not Timbuctoo. It is not more than two miles from Courtfield. I mean to walk the distance, for the benefit of my constitution, four nights out of the seven, after I have struck work. Do you dare to suggest that I have enough walking already? Why, it only keeps me in training for more. I shall get as many stones weight as your uncle Cuthbert has the advantage of me, if I do not increase my amount of exercise. Cuthbert says something of getting a phaeton, in which you

may be driven or drive, and which your aunts can use. Come, you have no reason to complain, my dear. You will be charmed with Brasbœuf, which, alas! is not so old in its house and grounds as its name would imply; but for a fine new place, it is very tolerable, pictorially. You will enjoy, like any other rational girl, having a proper amount of freedom and indulgence."

Ellen shook her head sadly and sceptically; but she was conquered, and Christopher's predictions all came true. She was duly installed with Cuthbert at Brasbœuf, where she was soon wonderfully contented.

That did not prevent her from planning constantly how often, in accordance with fidelity to her charge, she could reach Courtfield on foot, or in the phaeton, or on her pony, since Cuthbert had secured a capital pony for her, and her aunt Phyllis had hunted up the son of an old coachman and groom at the Park, who gave the niece riding lessons, just as the father had instructed the aunts. It remained Ellen's greatest delight to surprise Christopher at his work, at the risk of disturbing him, and causing him to lose concentration of thought, though she did her best not to chatter more than she could help, and would even sit as quiet as a mouse under stress of circumstances. She would fain have expended a large proportion of the liberal allowance of pocket-money which her uncle Cuthbert

at once put at her sole disposal, in purchase of expensive art-books, lithographs, and photographs, for which she had formerly heard Christopher express a wish, till he threatened to be seriously angry with her, and till her own sense of what was fitting and owing to her other uncle compelled her to acknowledge she was bound to forego more than a limited number of offerings to Christopher, and to her aunt Phyllis's philanthropic schemes, in order that she, Ellen, might appear as became the mistress of Brasbœuf. Ellen cherished a fond idea that in course of time she would open Cuthbert Hatherley's eyes to the transcendent budding—always budding—merits of his brother Christopher as a painter. She believed she would somehow overcome difficulties and subdue pride and obstinacy on both sides, until Cuthbert should hold it as his greatest privilege by every means—the whole Hatherleys going in a body to Rome, and what not—to promote the late bloom of Christopher's colossal but shy genius, and, lastly, to bask in its perfection and glory.

In the meantime the brothers, though on good terms, went their different ways. Each would have regarded it as an insult to the other, and a folly or madness in himself, to propose to have one-sided money transactions between them. Cuthbert viewed Christopher, from a height of tolerant pity, akin to not ill-natured contempt, as

an irredeemable duffer, while Christopher knew his brother's opinion, and did not resent it further than by classing old Cuddie as an unlicked Philistine.

Apart from her generous instincts, which, however, received considerable nourishment at Bras-bœuf, Ellen acquired, with the startling rapidity which especially distinguishes such gains, a lively appreciation of the elasticity, ease, order, and surface refinement that belong to the style of living of a man who has a good income and spends it with rational liberality. She could not help beginning to like the spacious rooms, which had appeared at first empty and dreary to her. As a disciple of Christopher's she could not of course approve, in the main, of the store of handsome upholstery, for which—consulting nobody as usual—Cuthbert had given *carte blanche*, not, unfortunately, to an accomplished decorator, but to an upholsterer, who, however extensive and wealthy his firm, was an upholsterer, and nothing more. But Ellen was forced to admit that there were innumerable comforts and conveniences, even prettinesses, if some of them were too much in Aunt Phyllis's line of brilliant shams, included in the furniture. Ellen's piano was far better than her music deserved, while her *jardinière* could be so arranged as to extort warm words of praise from Uncle Chris himself.

The young mistress of the house could not but approve of the experienced, well-bred, though not particularly attached, upper servants, who, speaking by comparison, gave no trouble themselves, and took upon them the trouble of the under servants. This was a wonderful revelation after what Ellen had seen of the opposite behaviour of her aunt Phyllis's *protégées*, who composed the staff of domestics at the Cottage. She could not but contrast the disorder, approaching to turbulence, apt to be engendered as a result of the alternation between Miss Phyllis's tight, and Miss Anne's loose hand on the domestic reins, while Miss Hatherley sat apart and dictated arrangements which nobody carried out.

Ellen felt a little frightened at the head gardener, rather more so, indeed, than at the head gardener's master. Still the gardens and greenhouses, and the creditable bit of landscape gardening which formed the grounds, continually offered some new delight in their rarities and luxuries of flowers and fruit, their delicate and magnificent blossoms—above all, in the room to breathe and to stroll, and the variety of scene comprised in a score of acres. The lawns here and shubberies there, and a regular bit of woodland yonder, with fine groups of beeches and elms, delighted a girl like Ellen after the homeliness, intimate familiarity, and narrowness, which

implied the absence of all seclusion in the Cottage garden.

Ellen could not be said to have moved into a higher set in society, for her aunts had continued to dwell among their old acquaintances, and kept up, in a fashion, their old connections by blood, marriage, and hereditary friendship. But the keeping up had been accomplished with difficulty in an intercourse becoming always scantier. The Misses Hatherley had been obliged to live in retirement on their diminished means. Except at the Park, which was the nearest country house, the sisters' appearance in society had dwindled to going in a fly, hired from Addington, to dine with an old neighbour once in three months, and to paying a round of calls in the same fly once in twelve months. The squirearchy's interest in the Hatherleys was revived by Cuthbert's return, and re-establishment of himself as a country gentleman among the old squires and squiresses who had no longer the fatigue of remembering the Hatherleys' poverty, and making allowances for it, in their lingering association with each other. To Ellen, especially, all was changed when she could ride and drive as easily to the Crampsons and Lomaxes and Hugheses as they could come to her; when she was no longer necessarily left out in the cold from the practice for the lawn-tennis games, or amateur concerts, or drawing-room theatricals, but was cordially welcomed as

an available ally, instead of compassionately suffered as a useless amateur and supernumerary.

Without any special worldly-mindedness in her young companions, simply through more favourable circumstances, Ellen's acquaintance with her equals and contemporaries, which had stood still ever since she was a child, and slumbered more or less for years, took a sudden start and ripened into pleasant intimacy in about as many productive months as matched the number of unfruitful years. If she had cared to do so, she might have figured in a constant round of mild dissipations and girlish gaieties. And Ellen did like her fair share of company suitable to her years, and was pleased to be dressed like the others, without racking her own and her aunt Phyllis's brains to get up some becoming quaintness which should carry off successfully the poverty-stricken antiquity of her garments. Ellen was not above setting some store by dress in accordance with good taste, in good materials—whether the costumes were of cashmere, or silk, or some more airy material. She liked having everything in fine keeping, from her dainty boots to her delicate gloves, from her muff to her fan. She was enchanted when she could so alter and modify the dressmaker's arrangements as to win a compliment from Christopher the painter. Ellen no longer flatly declined or accepted with a grudge one or two ornaments of some value which

her uncle Cuthbert gave her. She took with a fit sparkle of girlish and womanly pleasure, and with just the few words of smiling hearty thanks which he cared to hear, the excellent as well as beautiful little watch to replace the battered old one of her mother's, the pearl necklace, the gold bracelet, no longer of cobweb filigree, but of a more substantial amount of precious metal, and of more enduring workmanship. Cuthbert did not indeed lavish these gifts on his niece, "out of his own head," but when the lack of adornments on Ellen's part was somewhat timidly and nervously hinted at to him by his sisters Sophy and Phyllis, he put himself to the trouble and cost of supplying the deficiency on the first opportunity. He went further, for it was of his own accord he bought for Ellen her pony, which soon became dear to its mistress, almost as dear as Uncle Chris's old spaniel "Feathers," which had succumbed to age and infirmity during the previous winter. And as Cuthbert always bought the volumes—mostly on scientific subjects, with a divergence into political economy and solid travels—which he read for his own delectation, it might reasonably be supposed that the monthly book box which he ordered from Mudie's was for his niece's particular benefit, since he generally refused her anxious proposal to put down on the lists which she supplied the names of any books he wished to see.

It must be confessed, however, that Cuthbert

did not take much more notice of Ellen than the exigencies of their position required. She really stood in less awe of him than her usually dauntless aunt Phyllis showed herself; but the uncle and niece had few mutual sympathies. Ellen was not capable of wasting the sweetness of her thoughts and fancies on the desert air—that is, on an unresponsive man. The couple were very much a silent couple—the reverse of Ellen and Christopher when they got together. However, Cuthbert Hatherley was a silent man under any circumstances, and in spite of his silence and coldness Ellen had somehow attained to the certain conviction that she was safe in his kinsmanly care and regard for her. She had eaten her leek, renounced her silly exaggeration of enmity, and taken back her rash assertions. Cuthbert Hatherley was a man to be trusted. He was a good uncle, who deserved respect and affection from the niece whom he trusted, in his turn, like a true man and gentleman, to whom he dispensed bounties without caring to count the items, or asking more than a very moderate return for his benefits. But though he was not unworthy, though he was even worthy after a fashion, he was a whole world—and that justly—from rivalling his unsuccessful brother Christopher in their young kinswoman's affections.

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD FRIENDS AT THE PARK.

THE Hatherleys, old and young, were assembled in the Cottage drawing-room after a succession of wet days, the last of which had just broken up into a showery yet bright afternoon. The weather was still too undecided, while the day was too far advanced for Phyllis and Anne to set out separately on any of their ordinary expeditions to hunt up their Sunday scholars, inquire after their sick old men and women, or walk as far as the Park to take to Mrs. Bellamy Phyllis's last embroidery pattern—of her own design—or the recipe for preserved rhubarb, which she had seasoned so that even Cuthbert had not detected the difference between it and ginger—at least, he had eaten the preserved rhubarb without remark. The two ladies, after the first start, were in the habit of going about and working separately. Phyllis could not put up with what she called “Anne's sluggishness,” and Anne said she would sooner be dragged along by a steam-engine than run and toil at Phyllis's heels.

Miss Phyllis had been employing her spare time in gathering together and cutting out all the scraps of engravings, photographs, water-colours, and drawings, which she meant to paste together for a fancy screen. She was sitting complacently and busily plying the scissors before a huge heterogeneous heap of scraps. Christopher had striven in vain to prove to her that her scraps were outrageously heterogeneous and in-harmonious, so that the result must be a child's patchwork, or worse—an ignorant vulgar breach of all laws of fitness and affinity.

"Variety is charming, Chris," Miss Phyllis retorted unabashed. "Fools and children should not see work half done. It is wonderful that you who are crazy for originality and soul on the one hand, should be a slave to conventionality and the mere body of a thing on the other."

There was a suspicion of that variety which was so charming, and of the unconventionality of which she was boasting, in Miss Phyllis's dress to-day. She wore a monotonously coloured and shaped brown gown to be sure, but she had a cap on her head which was a careless adaptation, in muslin, of a jockey's cap. She had improved on it by pinning into it, over the left eyebrow, two crimson moss roses of her own manufacture, in a cunning device of crimson wool and real moss. She had not expected a call from Cuthbert. She always put on, not only a better but a more

sedate cap, as a subtle half-unconscious compliment to Cuthbert.

Miss Anne was luxuriating in a corner of the sofa, winking drowsily at everybody, sewing a stitch in her work once in five minutes.

Miss Hatherley would have been found at home almost in any weather. She seldom went abroad now, though she could not be called infirm. The extent of her out-of-door exercise was to walk to church, take a stroll in the garden, or, in these later days, as an amiable sisterly concession, drive over in Cuthbert's phaeton to Brasbœuf. She required her friends to come to her if they wished to see her. One of them had been at the Cottage, in spite of the rain, the day before. He had congratulated Miss Hatherley on looking her best, not an hour older than when the speaker had last seen the lady three years previously. The simper with which Sophy Hatherley had heard the words still lingered on her lips as she reclined in her own chair, in the toilet which was always elaborate, careful, and distinguished by an old-fashioned propriety—from her little white shawl to her black silk mittens.

Ellen and her uncle Cuthbert, though they were unlike in many of their inclinations, had agreed in feeling bored to death by several days' unbroken companionship, or rather solitary confinement, for, save at meals, Ellen sat in her drawing-room, and Cuthbert in his study and

business-room. The man and girl had conspired together, under the influence of the first watery gleam of sunlight which shot across the grey clouds, to drive into Courtfield. Cuthbert was contenting himself with looking in upon the family at the Cottage, but Ellen had driven on to the Park, at which she owed a visit, intending to come back and pick up her uncle.

For a wonder, Christopher was among the others. He had met with a slight accident, which was serious to him. He had sprained one of his wrists. Phyllis was happy in "treating" the sprain by a series of embrocations; as for Christopher, he cherished the reassuring belief that these could not possibly do him any harm, while the subservient swathings and bindings-up of the disabled arm, which were part of the treatment, together with time, would of themselves effect a cure.

The low-browed drawing-room of the Cottage had an out-of-date, pink rosebud-strewn paper on its walls. It was stuffed with cumbrous furniture, for it had been furnished with relics secured at the dismantling of the big drawing-room at the Park. A grand piano nearly cut the narrow cottage room in two. A square ottoman, the cover of which was a memorial of Phyllis's early industry in Berlin wools, filled a window recess, and, projecting a foot into the floor beyond, proved the stumbling-block of all who passed that way.

The ottoman cover was not the only sample of the work of the busiest hands in the house. The window curtains—Phyllis had rather wearied of them, and they were somewhat short and tight, like the last fashion in gowns—were of her knitting. The hearthrug, which disclosed an exceedingly tame brick-red fox, on a marine-blue ground, came from the same bountiful source. To match the rug were footstools, bearing the too vivid representations of bounding dogs and clawing cats, all due to Miss Phyllis's needle. The jars on the chimney-piece were of her painting. The artificial flowers in them—paper this time—were of her manufacture. The water-colours and the crayons on the walls were more her work than her brother's. After all, Christopher only suffered temporarily and in a degree from his elder sister's achievements. Habit accustomed him to all the offences even of the water-colours, and time softened them down till what had vexed his artist's soul hardly touched it. And the old-fashioned drawing-room—obstinate, with an amount of bounce in its obstinacy, as to what was suitable and pleasant for a drawing-room—had its enduring merits to the man Christopher. It was full of the essence of human lives honestly lived out there. It had, in spirit if not in matter, something of the crying need of the generation, repose; and, as a counteraction to the repose, which might well have passed into stagnation in

this quarter, came in, not altogether unfitly, the violent *bizarre* productions of Miss Phyllis, with their desperate longings and pathetic graspings after beauty and grace, even with their grievous shortcomings, which, however, kindly wear and tear had helped to rub out in many instances.

Into this drawing-room, with its elderly occupants severally fallen unwittingly into characteristic attitudes—Sophy posing still as an ancient belle—Anne lounging—Phyllis clipping furiously, with the eager unwearying fingers of fifteen—Cuthbert, with stolid authority, tapping the barometer—and Christopher leaning across the broad impediment of the ottoman, seeking to catch and impress on his memory a purple light athwart the grey clouds, where the hidden sun was travelling towards the west—Ellen Hatherley entered, bringing with her the breezy freshness of youth, of the open air, of the very rain-drops which had been shaken off by the tree boughs, and were still hanging like diamonds on the feathers of her hat.

Ellen, in her oldest hat and black jacket, the cardinal-red skirt, which Christopher said converted her into a flamingo, well tucked up, looked the personification of lithe blooming girlhood beside these stiffened or over-weighted figures, with the lines carved in the faded faces, and the white sprinkled hair.

Ellen was hailed and pounced upon by her aunts before she could exchange greetings with Christopher.

She brought news from that outer world, which was of so much more moment to her than it could be to any of them, for was not her life drama still to be played, while they had only to look forward to the last scenes of theirs, before the curtain should fall? She was the one link with the unknown future which these five elderly people possessed. Even the two men, though the one hated gossip and the other laughed at it, turned round to look and listen, as Ellen, in the power of her aunts, sat down in her old accustomed corner, took off her hat, and began to tell her stories glibly enough.

She had found all the family at the Park at home. Mr. Bellamy had a cold—no, not a very bad cold, only a little addition to his chronic cough. Mrs. Bellamy was not getting on with her anti-macassar, she was writing letters. Mrs. Tom had not been prevented from coming with her baby on her way north. She had driven all the way from Coventry in the carriage—closed of course. There had been quite a flood on the Culverton side of the paddock—park, if her aunts liked to call it so, but Mrs. Bellamy said paddock. It was feared, when the water fell, the roots of the old ash would be laid so bare, that it would cease to have any hold at all of the earth, top-

pling over the stream as it had toppled for the last thirty years. Was it only twenty? The Bellamys said thirty. Yes, it was that ash Uncle Christopher twice painted. Had Aunt Phyllis painted it too? To be sure, there it was in water-colours on the wall opposite; and since its days were numbered it was lucky that there had been multiplied sketches of its crazy topsy-turviness.

Oh, by-the-bye, there were visitors expected at the Park next week—‘old friends of the Hatherleys,’ Mrs. Bellamy said, though she, Ellen, had never heard of them. They were two Miss Foxes, daughters of a General Fox, who was dead; and they had been at the Park, and Ellen’s aunts and uncles had met them there, and known them very well, long ago.

“Foxes? What Foxes can she mean?” inquired Miss Hatherley, puckering her brows as became the genealogist of the family. “There are the Buckingham Foxes, but their father was neither a general nor an admiral; he was a clergyman; and, if I am not mistaken, he has become an archdeacon, and is alive to this day. And there were the Fox-Gerrards, but they are all dead, father and daughters, except the brother, who turned out badly, and had to go to Australia.”

“You are quite out, Sophy,” cried Phyllis. “Don’t you remember two insignificant little

sandy-haired girls who came with their father, a major or colonel, and paid a visit to the Bellamys just when they settled at the Park? I believe these Foxes were the first visitors the Bellamys had, after they blossomed into country gentry. I can recollect Mrs. Bellamy's walking in, and mentioning her expected guest particularly, as if his being in the army, and coming to stay with her and her husband, were as good as letters patent of nobility to people who had been in business."

"I think I remember all about the Miss Foxes," said Anne cheerfully. "They wore very large chignons, and their crinolines were in proportion. I suppose the girls were glad of any help to their size, they were such little bodies." And Anne glanced with happy approval at her own ample proportions. "Oh, yes, I am sure it must have been the Miss Foxes who wore Garibaldi's—both in the morning and in the evening—of different materials, of course. I think they had them of blue and white flannel for the morning, and I am sure they had lace, with ribbons let in, for the evening. I dare say we were intimate with the Foxes if Mrs. Bellamy says so," continued Anne meditatively and obligingly, "but I do not retain a very distinct recollection of anything more than having seen them once or twice."

"I dare say not," broke in Phyllis impatiently;

"we had more to think of at the time. It is all Mrs. Bellamy's loose way of expressing herself. 'Old friends,' indeed! But she would class people as old friends who had met once, and then met again, with a dozen years between. She is universally friendly and hospitable herself, and she has never got over that unwarranted *bourgeoise* manner of speaking. You need not trust above half she says on such points."

"Do I hear Satan reproving sin, Phyllis?" asked Christopher.

"What do you mean? That I draw a long bow? Never with regard to degrees of acquaintanceship or anything of consequence, though my feelings may get the better of me in trifles," answered Phyllis, who was so conscious of unusual truthfulness that she could afford to treat the contrary insinuation as a good joke. "We were going very little out, naturally, the year we left the Park and Ellen lost her father," Miss Phyllis condescended to explain; "though the Bellamys were always pressing us to come to them, however sore our hearts might be. They meant it well, and we have found them all along kindly disposed people, not desirous of removing old landmarks, and ready to show respect where respect was due. But you, Chris, or Cuthbert, there, may have seen more of the Miss Foxes the year they happened to be in our neighbourhood."

"All that I saw of them," said Cuthbert,

"was at the election at Addington. I was green in those days, and Mrs. Bellamy laid hold of me to escort her party to a room opposite the hustings. The circumstance made an impression on me," said Cuthbert with a slightly sardonic smile, "because it was the first time I had been in public after the bank broke, and there was a small attempt at a hiss, got up by some of the rabble, who, I need hardly say, had held no greater stake in the bank than in the country."

"As if we did not give up our father's inheritance to the bank's creditors!" cried Phyllis vehemently, while her words were echoed by her sisters.

"The point in question," said Cuthbert, raising his voice so as to speak down all the others, "is, that one of the little Misses Fox got frightened and dropped my arm. But she did not proceed to faint; instead, she accepted the arm of George Rice 'promiscuously,' so that I never knew whether the timidity were not a dodge to be rid of me in favour of a more eligible squire."

"Nonsense," said Phyllis with unwonted freedom of contradiction to Cuthbert, in her heat; "George Rice's father was only a brewer."

"But the brewer was already driving in his carriage, while we had just been condemned to put down ours, and I had even sold my last riding-horse, with the prospect of going on foot

for many a day. Mind, I don't say the girl was wrong. She was quite entitled to frame her own standard and stick to its requirements, even in so small a matter as a temporary escort on election days," said Cuthbert, preparing to walk away from the conversation, as if he were tired of it, in the course of a couple of sentences, to which, however, he contributed a parting word. "What I cannot account for is, that this Miss Fox's very ordinary and easily understood behaviour should have left any abiding impression on my mind, when I don't suppose I should know the girl again if I saw her."

"Girl, Cuthbert!" protested Phyllis, impelled again to call him to order. "She must be forty, if she is a day."

But Cuthbert had reached the other end of the room, and was once more far gone in his customary taciturnity, preparing to search, after an undemonstrative fashion, for his gloves, rather than to ask the women generally where he had put them down.

"By the way, Chris, did not you give one of these Foxes drawing lessons?" exclaimed Miss Phyllis, as memory, sufficiently pricked and pulled, flashed back another communication, in its succession of undreamt-of revelations, from behind the closed doors of the past.

"Upon my word I cannot say, at this date, whether it was I who gave her or she who gave

me lessons," said Chris with conscious carelessness. "Miss Caroline Fox was an accomplished young amateur artist, and I had not become a regular drawing-master in those days."

"I don't see why you should call yourself that now, Christopher," said Sophy testily. "It was bad enough your demeaning yourself to be an artist at all, and you know you don't mean to be a drawing-master."

"'Demean' and 'mean'!" cried Christopher, shrugging his broad shoulders, "which shall I protest against first, Ellen? There would not have been demeaning in a prince of the blood—there was none in the old brick Rupert; and it is not what I mean to be, it is what I am in the short-sighted world's eyes that stamps my position in society. Besides, to call a spade a spade is the best way to have it termed—through sheer contradiction—an agricultural implement. There's guile for you, Sophy!"

"You always beg the question," complained Sophy. "Whether or not, you have other talent; you have certainly a capacity for letting yourself down in the estimation of the public."

Ellen could not stay to fight Christopher's battles; she was carried off by Cuthbert, and presently Christopher strolled out of the room and mounted to his den. But he did not go at once to his easel or to any of the pictures, finished or unfinished. He did not lean against

the wall or stare fixedly at one or other, pondering what was wrong, striving to catch the clue to aid an effect, in which he was aware he had failed, painting always, when he was up there by himself, painting in spirit, though his wrist would not suffer him to paint in deed. Now he walked up and down the room with his hands behind his back, tasting in his mouth the ashes of old feelings and associations which the recent conversation had raked up.

Caroline Fox at the Park again, Caroline Fox still. There was no silly deduction to be drawn from that accident, except a passing wonder that both sisters had remained unmarried. 'Insignificant sandy-haired girls!' Trust even worthy women—the majority of them—for correct definitions of those personal qualities in which other members of their sex differed from themselves! Sophy, Anne, and Phyllis were all big women, and each of them had been dark haired in her youth. (Ellen took her brown hair from her mother.) Louisa Fox might have been insignificant and sandy-haired, though he rather remembered her as a pretty girl with tiny hands and feet. But Caroline had possessed the perfect medium height, with something which distinguished her from all other women in her carriage—a throat which reared itself like a swan's throat—he admired the same throat in Ellen—a finely shaped head set on the neck like the head

of a stag. What curves there had been between her little ears and her falling shoulders between her shoulders and her rounded waist, guiltless of deformed compression! Then the pale brown of her hair had been a rare, delicate beauty of tint, far before the comparatively common sunny, nutty brown of Ellen's hair.

Caroline Fox forty!—over forty, for she was the elder sister—what flippant young people would call a confirmed old maid, a mature middle-aged woman, who might have been, so far as years went, Ellen's mother! And he had never thought of her as a year older than she had been when they had parted, she a girl a little more than twenty, and he a young man a year or two her senior. When he came to consider it, though it pained him somewhat, to realise that Caroline Fox could have grown older, she must have changed as he had changed. And what had become of her dreams as well as of his? She had been a girl of eager, high aspirations. True, she had not received sufficient training, and her father, the hectoring, blustering, needy major, would have set his face against the idea, if she had even entertained it, of her becoming a professional artist. Major Fox had looked forward to more legitimate and unquestionable promotion for his daughter, as a gentlewoman, and had shown himself vigilant in putting a stop, in its earlier stage, to a foolish youthful entanglement, which might

have stood in the way of Miss Fox's making a prosperous marriage.

Caroline had submitted at once to her father's authority; and Christopher could not so much as blame her, for what was he, or what had he then to entitle him to assert his interests? Claims he had none. He had only held the hope, which was but hope still, and which, after twenty struggling years of non-fulfilment, had waned into the middle-aged man's hope deferred, that was no more than the pale ghost of the lad's sanguine expectations. Already, with Cuthbert about to sail for India, Christopher had seen himself the only man left in the family to care for the helpless women, including the child-woman Ellen. He had fulfilled the trust which had devolved upon him, and in fulfilling it he had let Caroline Fox go. He had no right to keep her. On the contrary, he would have had cause to accuse himself of selfish want of consideration, if he had received any reason to suppose that her affections were deeply implicated. But the whole acquaintance had not lasted beyond a few summer weeks; the love passages had been unpremeditated acts of delirium which could have tended to nothing, even in the eyes of the principals, if they would only have opened their eyes to see. There had been no engagement. Not one of his preoccupied family had so much as suspected an attachment, though her sister and Mrs. Bel-

lamy had taken alarm, and uttered some words of warning to the father. There had been no difficulty in severing the few feverishly forged, ill-fitting, brittle links of the connection.

Caroline Fox had been reared in a worldly-minded set, and her rearing was not without its influence on her, though she was something different from a mere worldly-minded girl. Her duty to her father had also come between her and Christopher. At the same time she was young, proud, and passionate, the style of girl who might have been tempted to admire a man capable of overleaping or bursting through all obstacles, let them be ever so sacred and binding, rather than a man who could rule his own spirit and admit the obligations which he ought not to cast off. Christopher had been inclined to fancy that Caroline Fox must have despised him, long ago, for giving her up, though she had given him up with at least equal readiness. What would Caroline Fox think now of his career? Be thankful that she had escaped the most distant chance of sharing it? Would she feel any shade of regret for his failure? since she had once believed in him—that he would leave his mark on art, and teach his own and succeeding generations a noble lesson, and he had done his best for a score of years, and remained baffled at the end of them, baffled and beaten to the close of the chapter.

On this rainy summer day—for the sky was once more dark, with heavy showers dashing against the window panes—Christopher could scarcely find a drowning man's twig to grasp, that he might be kept back a moment longer from the dismal conclusion.

It belonged to Christopher Hatherley's loyal modest nature that he never took into account—though he had forced himself with a pang to recognise in some measure what must have been the work of years on Caroline Fox—that she too had missed her mark in life, at least, the mark which her father had set up for her, apparently with her consent.

Christopher failed to see that she would not now be generally considered in circumstances to treat his collapse with scorn. He had become sensible that Caroline Fox was a middle-aged, single woman. When he reflected upon it, he knew that she and her sister could not be otherwise than poor—almost as poor as his sisters and niece had been before Cuthbert's return—and the Misses Fox had no near influential relation to come to their aid, for Christopher remembered the two girls had represented Major Fox's entire family. Yet the conception never entered the grey-headed drawing-master's brain that the gifted, accomplished young beauty of his youth was no longer entitled to look down upon him. He was so far right. Because he had started in

the race a man, with all a man's powers and opportunities, while she had been "only a woman," with her narrow field still further limited by a woman's warring instincts and rebellious revulsions of feeling.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SUSPICION OF A PLOT IN A RAILWAY CARRIAGE.

WITHIN a week Ellen Hatherley happened to be travelling a short distance in a train which stopped at Addington, where her uncle Cuthbert was to send somebody to meet her. She had been on a visit of a couple of days' duration at a country house, farther off than could be included with comfort in a drive or ride from Brasbœuf.

The weather continued wet, and Ellen, with sensible regard to health and modest economy, had, in spite of her dignities and privileges as the mistress of her uncle's establishment, covered up her dress with a nondescript waterproof which merged various ranks into one, and blurred several social distinctions. For, so far as the style and circumstances of the wearer are concerned, a modern waterproof is a good deal like an ancient domino, capable of furnishing an impenetrable disguise, which ought to supply a small compensation for the singularly unbecoming attributes of a garment that lends to the most

graceful, no less than to the clumsiest figure, the air of being muffled in a sack.

No doubt, Ellen, who had gone without scruple on many a merry journey, besides the famous expedition for the painters' show-day, in company with her uncle Christopher, in what he called his class—the third—now travelled in a first-class carriage, which ought to have defined to all right-minded people her style and title as a gentlewoman. But on the other hand everybody is aware that farmers', nay, butchers' and bakers' daughters do presume sometimes to invade first-class carriages. In addition there is sometimes lack of second and third class carriages, and a consequent transference of their passengers at the company's expense to the first.

To do Ellen justice, it was without the most distant idea of masquerading—indeed, vanity prompted her to believe she was, and looked like a lady in any dress—that she shrouded her ivory white morning gown, with its grey-blue bows of ribbon, in the sombre envelopment of her waterproof. It was simply with a commendable wish to spare a pretty and favourite gown from a premature washing.

There were three ladies in the carriage when Ellen entered it, but she did not take much notice of them till she had seated herself, and arranged such possessions as were on her hands. The chief of these was a housekeeper's basket

containing a valuable present of the eggs of a rare fowl, which were to be hatched to adorn Cuthbert's poultry-yard, and which could not possibly be trusted to the care of guard or porter, lest, in spite of the most solemn promises, he might roughly deposit the treasure in the luggage-van.

As Ellen glanced inside the lid to see that none of the eggs were broken, she thought of the girl whose imagination was fatally busy in hatching her eggs and disposing of her chickens beforehand; and it struck her that she herself must look a good deal like a better sort of country girl going to market. But she dismissed the absurd notion, with a silent laugh, the next moment. When she was free to turn her attention to her neighbours, she found they had already dropped her from the sphere of their observations, and had resumed the occupation in which they had been engaged, doubtless, before she disturbed them. At least her fellow-travellers were acting exactly as if she were not by. One lady was indulging in a soliloquy by way of conversation with another, while the third sat gazing from the window at the dripping trees and hedges outside, and only occasionally looked round to say a word in the one-sided talk going on. Two of the ladies were dressed with some similarity, and might be relations; the third, who played the part of listener to the first, was unlike the others in every detail of the outward woman,

from complexion and features down to the sweep of her skirt and the fringe on her mantle. It was impossible, to say the least, that she could employ the same dressmaker, and patronise the same linendraper's shop. Besides, it was not likely that the talking lady would have so much to say on the events and engagements of the past season to any one who must necessarily be more familiar with them than a mere friend or an ordinary acquaintance could be.

None of the ladies was young, though the fair hair of two of them prevented the conspicuous calendar of grey hairs which have not been subjected to a chemical process, while the plumpness of one of the pair kept incipient wrinkles and crow's feet at bay. The couple were both rather little women, according to Ellen's measurement. She had arrived at this private remark in her idle summing up of her companions' looks, when a recollection crossed her mind that brought a great accession of interest to her studies. Here must be the Misses Fox on their way to the Bellamys. Mrs. Bellamy had spoken incidentally of a third lady who was to accompany her friends, but as she had not been at the Park before, it was not supposed that either Ellen or her aunts would care to hear about her.

Ellen had not the dimmest premonition that one of the Misses Fox should be of vital importance to her; but the girl was sufficiently

disengaged in heart and mind to feel a lively curiosity with regard to her neighbours, when that curiosity had the smallest food to nourish it; and let it be remembered that such curiosity is the first step to sympathy. It was enough for Ellen to speculate which was the Miss Fox who had slighted Cuthbert, and which was the sister who had fraternised, in love of art, with Christopher.

These old acquaintances of the senior Hatherleys were not much like what Ellen would have imagined them to be. Certainly men and women differ greatly in consenting or declining to advance on the road of life, and the two ladies before her did not appear to the girl as if they agreed to be contemporaries of her aunts and uncles. She rather thought, with a quick shade of scorn, they would refuse to make way for new-comers, and would profess to be of the same generation as herself and her young companions.

In the first place, the Misses Fox of 187— did not wear the big chignons and crinolines to which Anne Hatherley had referred as noticeable traits of their identity in 185—. But that was only natural—a proper concession to the march of fashions. Miss Hatherley was the only sister at the Cottage who clung fondly to the style of toilet which she had graced before Ellen came into the world. Anne and Phyllis wore adaptations—suited to their years and figures—of new modes of dress.

But could these Misses Fox be as old as the Hatherleys? Ellen called herself back to correct a confusion in her mind. Her aunts were all older than her uncles, and the Misses Fox had been described as girls—of course, younger than the youngest of the Hatherley family, Christopher, when they visited the Park. There must be ten or fifteen years' difference between their ages and the age of Miss Hatherley, who had turned the corner of thirty when, in Phyllis's words, the sisters united with their brothers in giving up their "father's inheritance."

Even with that readjustment of ages the Misses Fox did not look nearly so old as, according to Ellen's strict sense of justice, they ought to have looked. Aunt Phyllis had said they must be middle-aged women of forty, while they showed to the critic faces—the one buxom, the other faded, yet both comparatively young faces—which might have seen not more than thirty summers. Withal, Ellen could not accuse the impostors, whether deliberate or involuntary, of being too juvenile in their costumes. Had it been so, as she shrewdly guessed, the ravages of time would have been more perceptible. It was the fair hair, the figures originally slight—though the one had acquired a by no means unbecoming amount of *embonpoint*—a certain chubbiness of cheek in the plump sister, and in the other a delicate somewhat high-bred refinement, which

softened the lines and angles, and caused a flavour of youth to linger with the middle-aged women.

Ellen did not remain in doubt as to any other mental question. She did not hesitate for a moment as to which sister answered to this or that echo of old days. Unmistakably, the thin pale Miss Fox who looked out of the window was the Miss Caroline Fox to whom Christopher had alluded, as so good an amateur artist that he might have taken lessons from her. When she glanced round she revealed breadth of brow, width between the eyes—with a soul in those eyes, which were grey, not blue, in colour—and a mobile expressiveness of mouth, sometimes taking the droop of weariness, sometimes the faintest curl of superciliousness, but qualified and corrected by the quiet candour and forbearance of the entire countenance. And the round, still rosy sister, with the unquenched smile as well as the unfaded pinkness of cheeks, was the Miss Fox who had forsaken Cuthbert in his adversity. "How horrid of her!" Ellen thought; and yet she almost laughed at associating such a crushing epithet with the gay, garrulous little woman beside her.

Ellen ceased to have the smallest inclination to laugh when an odd unlucky misadventure followed her chance encounter with the Misses Fox.

A change of rails had made Mrs. Tom Belamy's cousin journey with her back to the engine, and had drawn from Miss Louisa an animated recol-

lection that her friend could not "drive with her back to the horses," together with an eager suggestion that there should be a general move where their party was concerned. The change took place, and the consequence was that the flow of Miss Louisa Fox's conversation—addressed to the friend who now sat next to Ellen Hatherley—which had not hitherto reached farther than was intended, except in an occasional broken ripple, now set in a continuous current in the girl's direction, until she could not help distinguishing the sense in addition to the sound, and found, to her unqualified dismay, that it was the Hatherleys—Ellen's own aunts and uncles—whom Miss Louisa Fox was then describing. No one else could have sat for the picture, however highly coloured, of "three funny old things," largely dependent on a brother who had been forced to turn teacher of languages, or drawing, or something in Droitwich, or was it Birmingham?

For that matter Miss Louisa Fox did not take the precaution of avoiding tell-tale surnames. She was proceeding in her easy amplification and filling in of outlines. "We—Lina and I—knew these Hatherleys ages ago, just after the poor people's downfall, when we were at dear Mrs. Bellamy's with poor papa. Indeed, Christopher Hatherley used to go out sketching with Lina."

"Louisa!" cried Caroline Fox in a tone of warning, turning round, and with a glance across

the carriage at the strange young woman. And indeed, if any of the others had looked closely at Ellen, they might have seen she was quivering and flushing with mingled indignation and embarrassment.

Ellen must put a stop to this impertinent conversation. She must tell who the unwilling listener was. Yet how could she do it without extreme awkwardness and mortification, which, no doubt, the offender had richly deserved, but with regard to which Ellen felt it was hard that the innocent should suffer with the guilty?

Before Ellen could give her address, Miss Louisa Fox, with a careless air, muttered "Nonsense, Lina, you are always so particular," then went on with the conversation in French, and Ellen felt absolved from any further obligation to enlighten the rash woman. If a blundering fellow-traveller chooses to talk gossiping personalities in a railway carriage, and, in order to indulge the reprehensible practice, makes a clumsy effort at concealment by employing for the medium of communication a foreign language, spoken like a true Briton, is he entitled to further grace from the company? Should he not rather incur their just resentment and firm determination to circumvent him and penetrate his thin disguise, because he has further insulted them by the plain implication that he is better acquainted with foreign tongues than they are? Let him take the consequences of his audacious conceited

trespass against the intelligence and education of his neighbours for the time being.

Unfortunately Ellen yielded to this specious reasoning, and suffered for it severely.

It must be said that had Miss Louisa Fox spoken French "like a native," Ellen, for one, would not have been much the wiser of the lady's skill as a linguist. For Ellen's French had been imparted to her by her aunt Phyllis, who had presided to a great extent over her niece's education, and it had only been supplemented by a course or two of lessons from a French master, who had come over from Birmingham, much as Christopher went to the city of coal and iron, to gauge the wants of the country houses, within a certain radius of Addington, in the matter of pure French—taught grammatically and colloquially, with themes in literature. Still Ellen's accent was not bad, considering her opportunities. Neither was the accent of Miss Louisa Fox, who had an excellent ear, and had been several times abroad for considerable intervals during her father's lifetime. But both of these innocently accomplished ladies, though they might pronounce passably, and read an old-fashioned classic very fairly, would have been considerably puzzled to maintain or follow a fluent, idiomatic Gascon-permeated French conversation. Unfortunately they could each do something short of this feat. They could translate into mongrel French, such

as school-girls speak and understand, a succession of short, simple sentences—enough for telling a little story or making a few jests, and they could form an appreciative audience to the performance.

Thus Ellen clearly distinguished that Louisa Fox made an exception in her narrative of the decayed fortunes of the Hatherley family. She varied its melancholy by a brief, but gorgeous, account of Cuthbert's success in India, his return to his native country, and purchase of Brasbœuf. Then Ellen for the first time heard Cuthbert Hatherley—her uncle who was old enough to be her father—spoken of by the odious term "*un bon parti*;" in fact, the only *parti* worth reckoning upon that was left in the neighbourhood. The girl's ears, tingling with wrath and affront, caught the frisky, giggling proposal with which Miss Louisa wound up her French conversation, that these three middle-aged women should enter the lists, contend honourably for the prize, while whoever won ought to give the others "livery."

Ellen was too furious and too much hurt to hear Caroline Fox's angry protest in English, "How can you be so silly, Louisa?"

Ellen was saying to herself, in the extremity of her own ingenuousness and high-mindedness, "They are a party of adventuresses." She could no more have laughed at the outrage which had been committed on her, as some girls who believed themselves knowing in the ways of the

world would have laughed, than she could have weakly cried. "Can the Bellamys know the real character of these people?" she asked herself. "Ought I to go at once and undeceive Mr. and Mrs. Bellamy and expose their visitors? Could anything be more disgraceful and disgusting than for women of their years to plot to take in Uncle Cuthbert, and marry him?"

Ellen had not much time to determine what immediate course of action was called for from her, since the train was already close to Addington. The girl felt afraid that the rapidity with which she quitted the carriage, as if she fled from contagion, fell flat and became lost upon her companions, who were engrossed with the interesting search for their different belongings.

They would not have known the Brasbœuf phaeton, although they had seen it; while Cuthbert was by no means so devoted an uncle as to come over in the wet to Addington for the purpose of driving home with his niece. But Ellen just escaped an encounter with Mrs. Bellamy, who was looming in the distance, scanning the carriages in front for her friends. Such a meeting might have been productive, then and there, of an introduction which surely must have overwhelmed the Misses Fox; only Ellen was so cynical at this moment, that she had an idea they would have been capable of brazening it out, and condemning her, who had said nothing amiss,

who had not opened her lips, to endure all the shame for her sex's levity and coarseness.

Ellen got her last glimpse of the ladies as they stood among the luggage. The girl would have been glad if she could have thought she would never see them again. But in a country neighbourhood where everybody knew everybody, and the Bellamys and Hatherleys had maintained a degree of intimacy as long as Ellen could remember, this immunity was next to impossible. For though Ellen might be strongly tempted to feign illness and need of change, procure leave of absence from her uncle, and coax her aunt Anne to go with her to the seaside, there was something—when the girl came to think of it—so absurd and Dundreary-like in the frantic effort, on her part, to shun all future association with the Foxes, who should be the shunners and not the shunned, that Ellen dismissed the vague inclination as untenable.

She was not at all influenced by the impression that it would be at once mean and rash to forsake Cuthbert, and expose him, unsupported, to the wiles of his natural enemies. Her uncle was not so far past his prime that he could not take care of himself. She knew that he would never look at the Misses Fox and their friend—unless, indeed, he were capable of taking a malicious satisfaction in the fruitless advances of Miss Louisa—remembering, as he remembered, her quick withdrawal

from a temporary connection with him at a trying epoch in his history, when they were both young, and it was probable his feelings were more easily touched than at present. By-the-bye, Miss Louisa seemed to have conveniently forgotten that little incident, by its omission from her gushing disclosures, or perhaps her French was not extensive enough to include its details, Ellen reflected sarcastically. On the whole, she did not believe Cuthbert Hatherley would triumph over Miss Louisa Fox in circumventing her despicable forlorn hopes and schemes. He was too manly. He would content himself with ignoring her and them.

And Ellen, a true-hearted, self-respecting girl, was jealous of the credit of women, and would suffer a far worse enlightenment and infliction than she had suffered within the last half-hour, sooner than breathe a word of it to poison the mind of a man and an uncle, with regard to the motives and aspirations even of her unworthy sisters—women each of them old enough to have been her mother. She could not think of whispering it to Christopher, though she had no suspicion that he cherished any particular interest in the name of Fox. He would get hot and not know where to look, and feel as vexed and annoyed as she felt herself.

But Ellen had not sufficient strength of mind and reticence to keep the affair lodged solely in

her own bosom ; so she ended by imparting it in confidence to Miss Phyllis, the next time the girl was over at Courtfield, and found herself alone with her aunt assisting her in the apportioning of the Dorcas garments—the large and small jackets, gowns and frocks, petticoats and shawls, which belonged to one of Miss Phyllis's institutions.

Phyllis Hatherley's brown eyes flashed at the recital, much as Ellen's eyes had flashed at the occurrence itself.

At the same time Phyllis felt impelled to snub Ellen just a little for being the vehicle of such a communication. A girl like her to report such impertinent liberties taken with her elders ! Who knew but she might be laughing in her sleeve at the insulting suggestion of " funny old things," though it was meant for her own aunts who had brought the child up from her infancy ? And she might be surreptitiously taking her amusement out of the conception of her uncle Cuthbert as a beleaguered old bachelor invested and assailed by imbecile, ridiculous women, who ought to have given over aspiring to be wooed themselves a dozen years ago, and who, if they possessed common sense and proper feeling, would be thinking of very different matters.

Phyllis, though in her way she was fond of her niece, never showed herself quite fair to Ellen, who was loyal to the core, in spite of

flaws of temper, which, to be sure, reflected Phyllis's own infirmities.

"Are you sure you heard aright, Ellen? I should not have thought you would have been so quick in taking up French."

"It was English-French, Aunt Phyllis, such as you and I used to speak freely in the school-room, which tortured M. Jabaud's ears, I am certain, else he would not have picked it to pieces so cruelly, when he was such a polite little man."

"He was a French prig. My governess never found fault with my French," said Phyllis shortly. "If you were right in what you imagined, you heard a flippant woman—flippancy is not always confined to girls—utter an idle jest which did not become her years, which would not become any age. For I hope, Ellen, that you and Clara Ingram and Edith and Lucy Hughes do not suppose yourselves privileged, because you are not long out of your teens, to be guilty of equal bad taste?"

"Aunt Phyllis!" Ellen interrupted the speaker, full of resentment on her own account. "How can you think I would speak of a man in such a way? When did you ever hear me?"

"Well, it is not likely you would address such remarks to me," answered Phyllis composedly. "And now since you have happened to hear them, from those who should have been

your examples, the less you think and say of such silly vulgar-minded speeches the better. Really you ought not to have heard them, Ellen, at least not after the first word. Why did you not say immediately, 'I am Miss Ellen Hatherley. These ladies and gentlemen of whom you are talking are my aunts and uncles.' That would have been quite enough," said Phyllis triumphantly. "And then you would have had to listen to nothing more that was disagreeable. An honourable girl should have had that speech at the tip of her tongue instantly."

"I wish you had been there yourself to speak it for me," protested Ellen, reddening violently at the amount of truth in the censure. "Perhaps you would not have found it so easy. First I was taken by surprise and agitated, and after that, Miss Fox's beginning to speak French was such a miserably transparent blind—a sort of challenge for me to make out what she said."

"French or English, it was all the same," said Phyllis with sweeping decision; "you ought not to have heard another syllable, though you had needed to cover your ears. Above all, Ellen, I should not recommend you to attempt to entertain your uncle Cuthbert with this sorry gossip at his expense."

"Me dream of speaking to Uncle Cuthbert on such a subject!" cried Ellen, regardless of

syntax, and actually gasping, with her injured sense of honour and propriety.

"Well, then, let us have done with the worthless speculations of light-minded mercenary women, who may be the growth of society in London, or of the unsettled life which I understand these Miss Foxes have led, wandering from watering-place to watering-place and half over Europe with their father, till he could wander no more. These suits will just do for the little Wigginses," complacently regarding the best of her store.

"Aunt Phyllis, you are always thinking of the Wigginses," exclaimed Ellen with a keen sense of the injustice about to be practised on others, because of the unfairness which in her estimation had been dealt out to herself. "I cannot think what you see in them—sly, impudent monkeys. Aunt Anne says she detected Jerry mocking her behind her back. And Mrs. Wiggins with her whine and her misquotations from the Bible—you know it is all put on, and that she is the greatest scold and idlest busy-body in the village. Why should the Wigginses always have the first of everything, when there are the poor Collets and the Amoses and the Swans every bit as destitute, and a great deal more deserving?"

"Young people should not set themselves up as judges," said Miss Phyllis oracularly. "Mrs. Wiggins has been greatly tried. Your aunt

Anne ought not to make herself a guy, holding up her gown all on one side, and letting the other trail in the dirt so as to provoke little boys to laugh at her. Ticket and put aside these suits for the Wigginses, and, let me see, you may have that tippet for Miranda Collet."

"Poor little Miranda," said Ellen rebelliously, "I hope I shall be able to get her something better than that."

"As you please. There is nothing like exercising your ingenuity and falling back on your own resources, my dear," said Phyllis briskly, restored to her good humour by the mere exercise of her power.

Ellen made no further observation, but she reflected. "Aunt Anne and I, not to speak of the other members of the society, helped to make these clothes; and I do not see why the picked articles should all go to Aunt Phyllis's *protégées*. And there is another thing; I will never tell her a secret or ask her advice again."

CHAPTER X.

THE BELLAMYS' LITTLE DINNER-PARTY.

THE Bellamys at the Park were an elderly comfortable couple, who had enjoyed a fair allowance of the good things of this life, without many crosses to qualify them, and who were remarkable in the circumstances for not manufacturing the crosses which did not come in the course of Providence. Mrs. Bellamy was constitutionally a social motherly woman formed to be at the head of a large family, but, as her children were all sons, they had naturally gone out into the world and settled elsewhere, leaving her *tête-à-tête* with Sam Bellamy. It was a perfectly amicable and kindly *tête-à-tête*, but as the couple who maintained it were thoroughly commonplace, the duet proved a trifle monotonous, lacking variety, the breath of younger life, the air from the outer world. It was actually a grievance to Mrs. Bellamy that her daughters-in-law, with whom, strange to say, she lived on good terms, would not insist on their husbands bringing them and their children to stay often enough and long

enough at the Park. For Mrs. Bellamy was in her glory when the old nursery was full again, and most of the bedrooms occupied. But she was a reasonable woman, and, looking round on the troubles of others, she was resigned to accept her own moderate portion without magnifying them into bugbears.

Failing her family circle, Mrs. Bellamy was fain to fill the Park, as often as her nearly equally social husband would let her, with friendly acquaintances invited for long visits, and pressed to make them longer. And she did not resent the fact, though it puzzled her simple self-satisfaction a little, that some of these acquaintances were so ungracious as to find the cordial, but not at all brilliant hospitality of the Park too heavy and irksome, and betrayed an inclination to abridge rather than extend their period of stay.

Mr. and Mrs. Bellamy had long ago got over the little constraint and uneasiness which had at first attended their promotion from opulent people in business to landed proprietors. Their freedom from assumption, which was in itself a species of good breeding, their readiness to give liberally, yet unostentatiously, to every subscription set on foot in their vicinity, their good-natured willingness to put themselves and their house at the disposal of their neighbours, all contributed to a steady, if mild flow of popularity. Mrs. Bellamy had ceased for many a day to count

anxiously on "an army man" whose visit should help to establish some amount of prestige for herself and Sam among people whose sons and brothers were mostly in the army or navy, if they were not clergymen or barristers. She was by no means without social ambition, only it was on the "live and let live" principle, of the hopeful and happy, and not of the fretting and tormenting sort; and she had entertained peers and lord-lieutenants without being any the worse, if she had not been particularly the better for them. Altogether she had grown as if to the manner born, until her higher estate sat lightly on her shoulders. She and it had mellowed together, just as the over-gorgeous furniture with which she had originally supplied the Park had got worn, faded, and pushed about into looking suitable and at home there.

A really fine trait in Mrs. Bellamy was her fidelity to old associations. She had continued, during all these years, as attentive to the fallen Hatherleys as if she were still very much obliged to them for consenting to her replacing them at the Park, and for furnishing her with introductions, which she herself was now in a far better position to bestow. Neither had she lost sight of the army man's daughters. After the lapse of twenty years she was ready to welcome them back, elderly single women, managing to live on a small income, to the Park, which in their youth

they had graced, and which in their middle age was fit to grace them.

"Poor things! I am so glad they can come down with Tom's wife's cousin," said Mrs. Bellamy to her husband at the breakfast table, where she not only poured out his tea and chose his toast for him, but from which she regulated the fire in winter, and the open windows and doors in summer, also on his behalf. For the old active business man had lapsed a good deal into an invalid, though he was still able to move about and feel tolerably jolly, and jolliest of all when he was surrounded by friendly faces.

"Ain't it strange, Sam, that these two pretty girls, as they used to be, seeing so much of the world as they have seen, too, should neither of them have got married?"

"Perhaps they didn't want to," said Mr. Bellamy, speaking through the threatening impediment of a wheezy cough. "Ugh! ugh! Maybe they saw a little too much of the world for them to settle down in it."

"As if there ever was a woman born who did not want to, either openly or in secret!" exclaimed Mrs. Bellamy, with the most profound conviction, in reply to the first part of her husband's speech. "Of course a girl may be too nice, and may not quite know her own mind till it is too late, but then she has simply lost her chance by missing or mistaking the right man."

My private opinion is, the Miss Foxes were rather too much set out and ticketed for matrimony, and so they piqued or scared away a lot of ungrateful men. I do not mean that they set themselves out, for they were nice, modest girls ; indeed, Caroline, the elder of the two, was a little proud, don't you remember, my dear ? though she did manage to get into a bit of a scrape with poor Mr. Christopher, who was not to be thought of for a moment. But the poor dear Major had quite made up his mind that his daughters should marry soon and well. Possibly he had thoughts of marrying again himself, some well-to-do widow or old maid with a good portion, whenever he found himself unencumbered. But he showed his intentions too plainly. He could not conceal his hand—the Major could not," reflected Mrs. Bellamy, as if she herself were an eminent diplomatist.

"He played a good hand at whist," said Mr. Bellamy. "To be sure he let out scraps of bluster about the cards he held, and his best story was apt to be spoiled by his always making himself the hero, and announcing beforehand whenever he was about to do a good thing. The Major ought not to have needed a trumpeter in his regiment."

"He is gone now, poor soul !" said Mrs. Bellamy in the tone of one who regretted that she had cast a trifling reproach on an old acquaintance and

a dead man. "I am dreadfully afraid I shall forget to speak of him as the General to the girls, and as he was always very particular about his military rank, I dare say they are the same, especially when they have so little to live upon. We must drive them about and have a few parties while they are here, if your bronchitis keeps off. I wish we could do something worth while for them."

Mrs. Bellamy was full of benevolent zeal. She had, to her sorrow, possessed no daughter for whom to plan—always supposing that her plans would have been more complicated, disinterested, and prosperous than those of the late lamented Major—so that she had felt slightly inclined to indulge in a harmless fashion of match-making for young people in general, merely to bring them together, provide them with opportunities, and then trust to the natural happy consequences. Her propensity in this respect, which did not lead her to meddle to the extent either of manufacturing or thwarting inclinations, had proved, in modern parlance, one of the factors of her success in the county.

But the Foxes presented the desperate case of two women as old as Mrs. Bellamy had been when her son Tom took a wife. The ladies' contemporaries were now all sedate married people. No doubt there was still Mr. Christopher exactly where he had been left, but there would not be the smallest use in renewing that disastrous

penchant. Even if the couple were a pair of old, instead of young fools, Mrs. Bellamy could not be a third party in abetting imprudence which would be twice as gross as before.

But why not Cuthbert Hatherley, returned from India with a fortune, and provided with a suitable establishment for a wife? The one brother was as good as the other, and a great deal better. Cuthbert and Brasbœuf might yet make up to Caroline Fox for her early disappointment with Christopher. Here was a happy thought, a bright idea.

Mrs. Bellamy—not having Ellen Hatherley and her aunt Phyllis's maidenly objections to airing matrimonial speculations to men—at once confided her happy thought to her husband in an absolute flutter of pleasure. "Don't you think, Sam, Mr. Cuthbert Hatherley—he ought to be Mr. Hatherley by this time, but we country-people have such stiff tongues that when we have once got into the habit, a hundred years ago, of calling a man Mr. Frank or Mr. Charles, we can never get out of it again—what was I saying? Oh, don't you think Mr. Cuthbert is in want of a wife out at Brasbœuf?"

"Not particularly—ugh!—when he has taken his niece to keep house for him," said Mr. Bellamy with another suppressed chuckle, seeing his wife's little game instantly, and waggishly putting an obstacle in the way of its farther mental progress.

Mrs. Bellamy's face fell a few degrees. "Oh! yes, to be sure, there is Ellen," she granted. The amiable manœuvrer was pulled different ways, and showed herself considerably disconcerted. "It is vexatious, for I cannot see how Ellen is to go off unless she has the advantage of being with her uncle. She has very good looks, though she has a sharp tongue sometimes, like her aunt Phyllis's. But what can come of good looks if a girl is buried alive, though I have done the best I could for her? I wonder if Caroline Fox would be an indulgent aunt-in-law; if she would let Ellen stay on at Brasbœuf and chaperon her about? I am afraid Caroline would prefer to have her own sister Louisa. Nobody could blame her; for it would be simply natural—only women at forty are so much more difficult to marry than girls at twenty, and I don't think she can expect to find another Mr. Cuthbert with a place all ready in this neighbourhood, not unless he were a widower. There is little Admiral Halket, but he has a number of girls, two of them as tall as himself, and as headstrong and unruly as he is fiery and tyrannical. I hear there is dreadful family dissension in that house. I could not conscientiously advise any woman to go into it, in the character of a step-mother. She would run too great a risk of being miserable for life."

"You had better let well alone, all round, Midge," said Mr. Bellamy, who in his far-off

honeymoon days had bestowed on his wife what was now a singularly inappropriate name; but, as she had said, their old-fashioned tongues were stiff where changes were concerned.

"After all, I suppose I had better," admitted Mrs. Bellamy in a melancholy voice; however, she brightened up again the next moment. "At least there can be no harm in asking the Hatherleys to dinner, Sam?"

"None in the world," he answered promptly. "I don't know how we could avoid it, though we don't owe them a dinner. Bless us, we are never long in any man's debt in that respect."

Ellen had no resource save to form one of the guests at this dinner at the Park. It was the first time she saw the Foxes since they had travelled together. It is unnecessary to say that she immediately recognised the sisters and their friend Miss Wood, and she had an impression they had some recollection of her, though her moss-green gown with its trimming of bluebells formed a great contrast to her slate-coloured waterproof. In a short time she found the eyes of the three ladies either fixed at intervals upon her, or darting covert glances towards her, while a puzzled, troubled expression stole into the countenances of one after another. Ellen was glad that no one else, supposing she noticed the mystification of the visitors, could read the riddle. Miss Phyllis, who was the greatest diner out at

the Cottage, had excused herself on this occasion. It was one of Christopher's Birmingham days. There was no representative of the family from that quarter except Miss Anne, and she was entirely occupied with attending to the company in general, and with managing her long skirt and the ends of a lace scarf which Sophy had lent her, and Phyllis had pinned on for her, but which would go wrong—not that she minded it much.

When the ladies went to the drawing-room, gradually each of the three strangers made her way into the conservatory, until they were all to be seen standing in earnest conversation together by the orange-tree.

Ellen was the whole length of the room from the Misses Fox and their friend, and she would not have listened again to a word they said, for the world. But she could not help guessing the whole gist of their talk, and taking note of their movements and gestures. That was not a breach of honour. She felt sure that one was saying to another, "Could it be? Was that the same girl who had been in the railway carriage? Had she really been Miss Ellen Hatherley?"

Ellen was wicked enough to enjoy their punishment, only she knew it would not last. Already the plump comely sister with the coquettish cap was giving a defiant little toss of head and cap together; and Ellen divined Miss Louisa Fox was saying, "Well, then, we need not break our

hearts over what was only an awkward mistake. Listeners never hear good of themselves. I did not say anything very bad, did I? Merely some stupid nonsense about her uncle Cuthbert's being a marriageable man, and that we three ought to pull caps for him, and that was in French. Lina—Miss Wood, I declare I said it in French, I remember now perfectly. Lina looked at me or said something, for she is always calling me to order for mentioning people's names in public, though how she came to think that common-looking girl in the waterproof with the bundle—or was it a basket?—was a public worth minding, or could make head or tail of what I was saying, even if it had been treason, I cannot conceive. What business had Miss Ellen Hatherley to dress herself up and go and take in people in railway carriages? But I took the hint, and said the rest in French. Have you forgotten, both of you? She could not have been a bit the wiser." The other Miss Fox, who wore no cap, and looked still paler as well as fairer in her black grenadine, with nothing gayer and brighter than a spray of jessamine to relieve its black, continued to look reproachful and vexed.

But Miss Wood, who was not, indeed, much implicated in the offence, seemed inclined to join with Louisa Fox in laughing it off.

Finally, the three ladies ended their confabulation and came back to the society of the mem-

bers of their sex. And to the scandal of Ellen, Miss Louisa walked boldly up to her and entered into conversation, remaining talking till coffee was brought in, and then sitting down on an ottoman and inviting Ellen to sit down by her.

Certainly Miss Louisa Fox's prattle was as inoffensive as Mrs. Bellamy's, and more amusing, for she skimmed over a greater variety of subjects, visited foreign countries, as it were, and repeated her version of town talk, for which country ears are greedy. Withal the little woman also gave indications of an amiable capacity for sympathy. She referred to having been at the Park before, remarked with due animation on the alterations which the Bellamys had made in the house and grounds, as if she had remembered the place all these years, and put some inquiries as to Court-field and the neighbourhood generally, which showed that neither had she lost sight of them—in short, offered Ellen a field for conversation on her own account. Viewed in the light of an older woman who was taking the trouble to draw out and encourage a young girl, the speaker might have been considered quite interested and kind. She plied her companion with questions as to how fond she was of lawn tennis? whether she preferred riding or driving? whether she was a slave to crewel work? whether she had to face difficulties in getting charming old patterns and suitable colours in wools? whether she would care for loans

of patterns, or addresses of shops where every shade of every delightfully deep or dim colour was to be had without difficulty?

But all the friendly pleasantness, and all the compliment of a senior's notice of her, which in itself Ellen was right-minded and modest enough to prize and not to despise, were wasted upon the girl. If she had known nothing of Miss Louisa Fox before that evening, Ellen Hatherley might have classed the lady as a wonderfully yet by no means repellently youthful woman for her years, a woman who still possessed some claims to being pretty, and even more, to being agreeable in a frank, fearless, and cheerful, though not at all in a *cléver* way. As it was, Ellen rejected every overture with obduracy, in the light of a base design against Cuthbert and Brasbœuf. She looked upon her next neighbour as a hard designing little woman, who was to be distrusted, avoided, and held at bay from motives of discretion and duty, though Cuthbert was safe enough from her and her allies.

If Ellen, in the youthful severity of her righteousness, had been capable of making the observation, she might have seen that the rebuff of her cold refusal to be propitiated told on the woman by her side. A shade of mortification clouded ever so little the sunny mature face. Louisa Fox drew back, with the wistful look of a child that has been shaken off in its efforts to

make up for some naughtiness ; but here it was not the child, it was the woman who was affronted and hurt in her simplicity and craving for goodwill.

But Ellen worked herself up into detesting the artful manœuvring Miss Fox, with the apt surname, as the girl in her mind distinguished Louisa. She had less dislike to the other Miss Fox, who had not begun by seeking to become better acquainted with Miss Ellen Hatherley, and who, after she had detected, out of the corner of her eye, the treatment her sister received, straightway ignored the delinquent as though she were a rude selfish young girl.

There were two other neighbours at the Bellamys' little dinner, in addition to the Hatherleys. These were a recent bride and bridegroom who had not married till after a long engagement. They presented the discrepancy of having cut their wisdom teeth, and yet being in a position when wisdom teeth are rather in the way than otherwise. They were still self-conscious, and when they were not occupied with each other, were engrossed with themselves. They were not, therefore, any considerable gain to their hosts and fellow-guests, unless as supplying a fund of amusement for a state of the feelings which, while only gently laughed at in the young, with a perception of pathos in the humour, is somehow regarded as preposterous when a man's beard has become

grizzled and a woman wears a cravat to hide a tendency to scragginess of the throat.

Mr. Bellamy had his rubber of whist, in which the other players were his wife, Caroline Fox, and Cuthbert. But the last lady and gentleman, to Mrs. Bellamy's regret, could not be partners, since a husband and wife's partnership in a game of cards is hardly more permissible than in a quadrille. This obligation prohibited, for the present, cards and dancing to the billing and cooing couple.

There was a little music, to which Ellen and the muffled-up bride, whose husband was allowed by the canons of society to lean over the piano stool, and turn the leaves of her songs for her, contributed a humble share. But the benefactress of the party was Louisa Fox. She had early displayed a talent for music, as her sister had evinced some genius for drawing, and the talent had not been suffered to rust, but had received careful cultivation. In spite of years with their wear and tear, Louisa Fox's voice was still round and flexible. She took Ellen aback by the sheer, sustained melody of her singing, until the girl was almost tempted to walk across to the piano, and sign a truce with the singer on the spot.

Everybody listened, more or less captivated. The card party paused in their contest for the last trick, and stayed their struggle, as if by

consent, to hear better. Ellen saw Caroline Fox look first from the arrested players and then to her sister, with a smile of gratified family pride and affection. Evidently these two, who had shared life together, were a united pair of sisters. "Sing *Sehnsucht*, Louisa," Caroline suggested. Louisa, with a little nod, complied. Then the rest of the company, following the sister's example, clamoured for different songs from the pretty plump little woman—whose throat was like a pigeon's—in the sage silk with the suspicion of peach in the trimming, and the butterfly bow on her dainty lace cap; and she obligingly complied.

At last Cuthbert Hatherley, who was passionately fond of music, became moved to join the other petitioners, and asked for a well-known Irish song of his youth, "Kathleen O'More;" a song, though he did not say so, fit to wile a bird from a tree, in its exquisitely subdued burden of tenderness and sadness.

But Miss Louisa Fox had to confess contritely that she did not know the song, and though she waited with her hands on the keys and her face turned expectantly to her prompter for the moment, Cuthbert mentioned no other song.

It had given Ellen a thrill, at which she was ready to laugh scornfully, when her uncle followed the fashion and requested his song. She indemnified herself for that idiotic uncalled-for

note of alarm, by enjoying the polite impenetrability—for Cuthbert was not a boor—with which he in his turn received Louisa Fox's essay to renew their old acquaintance. On the breaking up of the card party, the two had been thrown together for a few moments, and without question the lady improved the occasion. She was suave and she was sprightly to the taciturn gentleman. Ellen felt there were no bounds to that little woman's effrontery. She would not be at all astonished to learn that Miss Louisa Fox was alluding unblushingly—no, not unblushingly, for the pink in her cheeks had deepened to rosiness while she was speaking—to the long gone-by day of the election at Addington. She was probably scolding herself, as a timid goose of a girl, and moralising sentimentally on the years which had fled since then, bringing great changes on their wings, while she contrived to insinuate that the changes had all been in his favour. How invulnerable Cuthbert looked to the crafty assault—all the more subtle that it was not entirely insincere!

Yet if Ellen had been in circumstances to estimate impartially and correctly, she might have recognised that though Cuthbert said as little as possible, and did not smile and bandy compliments and jests, as he was meant to do, or show the slightest desire to protract the short *tête-à-tête*, he did not hurt Miss Louisa's *amour-*

propre and genuine softness of heart, as Ellen had wounded them. He gave the woman credit for the last, and he was simply himself, grave, matter-of-fact, and reserved: he was neither supercilious nor sulky, he was decidedly not savage.

CHAPTER XI.

“IS THAT ‘ALL?’”

NO, nothing could repress the callousness and intrusiveness of these Misses Fox, Ellen said to herself again, when she encountered them calling, with Mrs. Bellamy, on her aunts, and not content with sitting chatting—at least, Miss Louisa Fox chatted briskly with Miss Sophy and Miss Anne, Miss Fox and Miss Phyllis rather fought shy of each other—but proceeding to accept the *entrée* to Christopher’s studio. There the unsolicited critics examined the pictures, stared about them, and made their shallow comments in the painter’s absence.

Of course Ellen could not tell what inward impulse might have moved the Foxes—one or both—how impossible it might have been for them to avoid the ordeal. She could not tell what it might have cost one sister to make that apparently free and easy invasion and inspection, in the presence of various people who should not all have been unconscious, who might, at any moment, suddenly recollect what seemed to have passed out of their minds, or what they had come to regard as an out-of-date trifle not worth considering.

Yet Ellen was aware of a whole code of signals quickly and swiftly telegraphed by one Miss Fox to the other. Even the prejudiced girl did the women the justice to comprehend that these had nothing to do with petty plots against the liberties of the Queen's subjects. They were the ordinary signs of question and response between sisters who, however different in character and taste, are closely attached sisters nevertheless. Ellen did not understand why, but it was Louisa who looked oftenest at Caroline with an affectionate, interested, half-doubtful appeal, to which Caroline looked back now and then with an air of reassuring composure and carelessness.

Ellen heard a single observation from the amateur artist on Christopher's pictures. It was spoken of that one of the haymakers, which had always struck Ellen as possessing so perfect a background and aerial distance, that she was inclined to think any defects in the foreground might well be forgiven, and also of the unfinished picture of the unknown fugitives on the easel. After gazing fixedly at each in turn, Miss Caroline Fox turned away, and as if she were entitled to ask for a great deal more, inquired with a listlessness which was not without a strain of half-incredulous impatience—"Is that all?"

Even after the elder Miss Fox had been told there was nothing else save a few sketch books, and had walked off to a window with the corners of

her mouth drooping worse than ever, and her brows involuntarily arching over her grey eyes, and was staring intently at some object in the far distance, Ellen, though she knew nothing whatever of the former relations between the painter and this stranger, had a dim intuition of what was passing in her breast. The slight little woman who did look as if, had the opportunity been granted to her, she could have pulled herself together and converted her relaxed acquiescent indifference into nervous energy and indomitable spirit, which might have overthrown kingdoms and conquered empires in some spiritual field, was again uttering the indignant protest, "Is that all? Has it come to nothing more than this? Christopher Hatherley's youthful promise has fulfilled itself—in what? He is between forty and fifty, and he is only a drawing-master with a few pictures, full of faults, and unfinished."

Ellen was furiously angry and keenly pained because of the truth of the summing up.

Ellen was spending the day at Courtfield, so she came in for the comments of her aunts on their visitors.

Miss Hatherley persisted in calling them "the Fox girls," and saw no good looks about them. She was extremely difficult to please on the subject of looks. To hear her, the listener was driven to conclude that the girls of the present generation fell deplorably behind their mothers and grand-

mothers in physical qualities. Beauty and symmetry of form, no less than dignity of deportment, had departed, in a great measure, with the first decade of Queen Victoria's reign.

Miss Anne was of opinion that the Miss Foxes of 187—, at least Miss Louisa Fox, proved as conspicuous for tightness of skirt, relieved by sundry unaccountable swathings and sashes, knotted in great bows and ends, anywhere and everywhere, and for a knob of hair—like a horse's tail when it is plaited and tied up for races and fairs—in the nape of her neck, as Miss Louisa Fox of 185— had been memorable for extent of crinoline and a widespread fan of a chignon. They were affable young women—Anne finished approvingly—and seemed to go back on old friendship quite naturally.

“There was no old friendship to go back upon,” Phyllis maintained stoutly, “and affability is a most improper word in this case. What are we, or what are the Miss Foxes, pray, that they should be affable to us? If you had said complacent it might be nearer the mark, though respectful ought to have been more appropriate still. Elderly girls with plenty of *savoir-faire*—that is my definition of the Miss Foxes. They have lived long enough in the world to know what they want, and to set themselves to get it. At the same time they have too much worldly wisdom to cry for the moon, when they have discovered it is the moon,

and not green cheese provided for their consumption," pronounced Phyllis. "No, Ellen, they are not disagreeable, or dictatorial, or insolent, sneering women—you ought not to let yourself be so run away with by prejudice—and what should they sneer at? Besides, they are too wide awake for that. They have yet their way to make in the world. Their *rôle* is still to please—not that the elder sister takes much pains to do it, when she does not think it worth her while. One ought to see her in company, when she has an object in view, or a point worth striving for. With us she has been abstracted, cool, cross, probably, like you girls, Ellen, in this ill-bred generation, when you never think it is your part, if you are called upon, to exert yourself to the utmost to contribute your small help to entertain the company."

Ellen was at her old post, by the gate, to meet Christopher, and dispute with him about taking his portfolio from him, to escort him up-stairs for the pleasure of bearing him company in the ascent, to run down again to ascertain that the young cook had the chops and the trout ready, to see that Christopher's claret was keeping cool and his tea hot, to take another look and put a finishing touch to the leaves in the basket of peaches from Brasbœuf, to move the glass with the single superb damask rose which she had gathered for the occasion, that it might not come in contact with his elbow.

The period of Christopher's return on his Birmingham days had always been the cream of the twenty-four hours to Ellen ; and his arrival, especially if he had not expected to find her there, remained the best thing in her visits to the Cottage. Christopher came down looking, if not like a giant refreshed, like an honest working-man who has gone through the washing and brushing, and made the little changes in his toilet which have served to remove the dust and stain of the day's toil from him, so that he is comforted and brightened, and in trim for such domestic recreation as the gods have provided for him.

"Well, what has been going on to-day ?" he asked in nearly as buoyant a tone as if he were a boy to whom the grand arcanum might turn up with any rise of the sun.

The great event of the day had been the call paid by the Misses Fox, under the wing of Mrs. Bellamy ; and Christopher had the advantage of hearing it given with his three sisters' different verdicts on the strangers, except, indeed, that Miss Phyllis modified her assertions for her brother's ear. She only said the Misses Fox had seen a good deal of the world since they were last in the neighbourhood, and, as might be expected, they were better worth listening to, if not looking at. According to Sophy they had never had much to lose in looks, but for Phyllis's part, she thought they were two comely *passées* little women, par-

ticularly the younger. Miss Phyllis ended her sentence with determined magnanimity, rearing her short neck with the small head poised fairly. It was crowned to-day by a round flat cap, like a Scotch bonnet, having a *ruche* of dark green and yellow tartan silk—the Gordon set. Ellen, as a child, had possessed a frock of it.

Christopher heard in silence. He might be too courteous to interrupt, or too busy satisfying his hunger and thirst to put in an observation. At last he turned abruptly to Ellen: "And what did you think of the new-comers? They are new to you," he said in a measured voice, which did not sound quite like Christopher's frank bluff tones, that had something of a boy's impetuosity in them still sometimes.

"I did not like them at all, Uncle Chris," answered Ellen with emphasis, and a little dogged glance at her aunt Phyllis.

Ellen was not going to pretend even to the slightest shade of admiration which she did not feel. And what call was there for magnanimity here?

"Eh, Ellen?" exclaimed her uncle, startled either by the unvarnished disfavour of her opinion, or by the strength which she had put into it.

"No," said Ellen, lifting up her voice and bearing her testimony with the earnestness which often wrinkled the girl's smooth forehead in soft

temporary folds, and imprinted a dint, resembling the Redgauntlet horse-shoe, in the centre, while she spoke out her decided views. "They are women of the world, as Aunt Phyllis says. Calculating, mocking, I dare say; frivolous, I am sure, by the carefully studied simple elegance of their costumes to be worn in the country; women I should never care to know any better—detestable women to be patronised by."

"Ellen!" said Christopher again, putting down his knife and fork and looking at her in absolute bewilderment, "what has come over you next? Have you become a vixen in the course of two days, since I saw you last? When I used to know the Foxes, Louisa was as good-natured and harmless a little girl—though it seems she did drop Cuthbert's arm on the election day at Addington—is it that tradition which has served to infuriate you?—as any one could wish to meet. For Caroline Fox, she was certainly worth knowing, and she was incapable of patronising you. She was thoughtful, not frivolous, when she was hardly past your age, and she was full of——" He broke off, and finished more guardedly. "Of course time may have altered the pair."

"Girls should not allow themselves to use strong language with regard to people twice their years, of whom they really know little or nothing," said Phyllis, who had an exasperating habit of talking to and at Ellen, as if she were still at the stage

when old-fashioned children had been called upon to repeat for their moral improvement—

"Let dogs delight
To bark and bite."

"I don't understand what the dispute is about," complained Miss Hatherley; "all I have to say is that these Miss Foxes could never have had any pretensions to handsome persons, or an air *distingué*, though I do not deny they are passable enough little bodies."

"And all I have to say," cried the incorrigible Ellen, "and I will not offend you, Aunt Phyllis, by putting it in strong language—by the way, that expression means swearing in modern speech—I did not swear at the Miss Foxes I hope? I am afraid you will think me very wicked if I add I do not think they are worth swearing at! But I trust nobody else is guilty of strong language. All I will say is—that if the Miss Foxes ever answered, in the slightest degree, to the description which you have given them, Uncle Chris, then time *has* altered them."

The subject dropped until Ellen was with Christopher in his studio, where he glanced quickly round. A picture was out of its place by a quarter of an inch, his easel had been moved more towards the light. In general Christopher was the least observant and the easiest of men and artists where such details were concerned.

But to-day his eye seemed at once to take in the slightest indication of his possessions having been tampered with, and the tampering appeared to make an impression on his mind.

"Were the Foxes up here?" he asked instantly. "What brought them here?"

"It was not from any request of theirs," answered Ellen drily and reluctantly.

She had no love of differing with Christopher for the difference's sake, and she had already found they disagreed in their estimate of the Misses Fox, who, when they were young, must have thrown dust in Christopher's eyes, as now, when they were old, they aimed at throwing dust in Cuthbert's.

"Mrs. Bellamy asked for you, and said she understood the weather was fine for sketching, since she had met the girls of Miss Storer's boarding-school in Addington, who had come in an omnibus to old Combermere Manor-house for the purpose of sketching—nice sketching theirs would be, Uncle Chris! Then Aunt Anne volunteered the information that you were busy with a picture as usual, and inquired did Mrs. Bellamy and her young friends—she might have spared the adjective—care to see it? Of course they had to say they cared, and they came up here, but I saw that they did not meddle much," said Ellen jealously, as if she had been the custodian of a public trust, and the ladies had been

the great unwashed, roaming about on a national holiday.

Christopher waited a moment to let Ellen say more of her own accord. When she tacitly declined, he asked slowly and a little shyly, looking another way, "What did they look at? What did they say?"

"Oh, they looked at everything, if you can call that looking, when the eyes take in nothing in particular," said Ellen, now growing testy under the cross-examination, or from some other provocation, "and they said nothing in particular, either. What would you have, Uncle Chris, when these women are not critics? I dare say they would prefer a staring signboard to a work of art, any day."

"Mrs. Bellamy might, but not the Foxes," replied Christopher with conviction. "They have been trained to know a little, and one of them is a born critic. Miss Caroline Fox is by nature a painter, undeveloped if you will. Did she make no observation? I should like to hear what she said, if, indeed, she were not struck dumb with awe and delight."

Christopher perpetrated a poor joke to hide his wistfulness and agitation.

"Then if you will have it, though I don't think it will do you much good," said Ellen, the more peevish by his persistence, and by his caring so much for what either of these horrid

little women said of his pictures, "but, mind, I believe she referred to quantity rather than quality," explained Ellen, rueful still to hurt Christopher's feelings. "Miss Caroline Fox uttered the pregnant sentence, 'Is that all?'"

He gave Ellen a quick disturbed glance, but satisfied she spoke at random, he shrugged his shoulders slightly, and granted—a trifle brusquely no doubt—"Certainly that was not much. Now go away, my dear, and leave me to make the little all something more by a spell of work."

But Christopher did not touch a brush for a long time after Ellen quitted him obediently. He walked up and down, as he had done on a former occasion, then he went and stood by the window in the very place which, unknown to him, Caroline Fox had occupied a few hours before. How she must have been struck with the despicable conclusion, the miserable failure of his life, he thought bitterly. "Have I indeed laboured in vain and spent my strength for nought? or was there ever any strength to spend? any power to throw away? was the whole a vain dream? God knows! And if He knows," considered Christopher after a pause, more quietly and reverently, "He must have ordered everything from beginning to end. Would it not have been a mighty deal worse, if I had mistaken my farthing candle of artistic ability for a great

lamp of genius, and sacrificed these poor souls of women to my fancied capacity, which was to prove a delusion and a snare? I was their natural protector, barring Cuthbert, who did not happen to see the kinsman's obligation. Is selfishness the mother of genius? Can a man hope to rise above his lower self intellectually by trampling upon his higher self morally, and seeking his own advantage at all hazards, and at any loss to his neighbours—his weaker neighbours? There is Cuthbert, who has gone forth and prospered and come back rejoicing, and done as much, at small cost, for the womankind in the end, as I tried to do, with sundry drops of my heart's blood, in the beginning. But is it as much? can it be, when the cost is not worth the counting, though the sisters—I don't say Ellen—naturally put such value on it, as voluntary bounty, which has besides all the charm of novelty and variety? Yet would I change identities with old Cuddie at this moment? I doubt it, conceited ass that I am, no doubt. There was Romney, positively deserted his wife and child, the heartless brute!—at least, left them very much to shift for themselves, and felt that he did not want them, and would be ashamed of them, all the time he was having his fling and bringing his art to perfection in London. Yet what a grand painter Romney could be! How he would bring out the true gentleman or lady, and paint the chivalry and

tenderness which had no existence in his own breast! I suppose the greatness of the artist was there, and the hardness and meanness of the man could not stamp it out. If he had been a better man there is no saying to what the greatness of the painter might not have reached. Or is it possible, under God's reign, that while the moral light in the man was not dwindling into darkness, but rather kindling into brighter, purer flame, his genius might have become so maimed and crippled by adverse circumstances, that he must have contented himself with a duffer's struggle after high art, without any triumphant achievement for him which ought to have surprised the overwhelmed approval of incredulous contemporaries, as well as of clearer-sighted, fairer-judging posterity? The old doctrine was that artists, like butlers, should be without encumbrances; so Sir Joshua told some rash, human-hearted beggar—that he had ruined himself as a painter, because he had married a wife. The prophecy did not always come true, even then. But it has never been said, or expected, by reasonably modest mortals, that a man's poor best is to bring him in a miraculous return of professional, let us say, artistic, success. Virtue, if there has been a modicum of virtue, should prove its own reward. Heaven is made for beaten men. I wonder if it will be any part of their heaven to regain the chances which they have resigned, to accomplish

there what they consented, more or less voluntarily, to forego here? I am not sure that it is altogether a low idea, or that it bears entirely, or to any very large extent, on our eternal disputes with regard to who shall be first and greatest."

By the time Christopher had arrived at this conclusion, the furrows of pain and perplexity had begun to be smoothed out in his somewhat rugged face. It was near its bravest and noblest in expression when he gathered together his brushes, and set himself, whistling softly, to work for his high, distant, well-nigh unattainable goal.

CHAPTER XII.

A WISE MAN BEFOOLED.

ELLEN met the Misses Fox often, within the next few weeks, in the gentle round of country gaieties which the Park started, and which were prolonged by the neighbouring houses, in honour of the Bellamys' guests.

Necessarily the girl grew to be on comparatively familiar terms with the visitors, though Louisa Fox made no more direct attempts to undo the effects of her blunder, and Caroline, deterred by what had occurred with her sister, never so much as sought to cultivate Ellen, only watched her with curiosity sometimes, when the watcher was at so safe a distance as to be safe from observation.

But Ellen neither forgot nor forgave, and could not be brought to like the Misses Fox any better than at first, though they let her alone.

Cuthbert was nearly always along with Ellen in the visitors' company. Christopher was occasionally present also. Neither of the gentlemen appeared to make any great progress towards

intimacy with the ladies. Christopher was not a whit further forward than Cuthbert, though the younger brother was by nature decidedly the more accessible of the two men, and though it seemed that he had known the Foxes much better formerly than Cuthbert had known them. Indeed, Miss Louisa Fox had met Christopher in a frank, friendly fashion, to which he had responded so far as to show the manner was warranted. But he drew back from her just as Caroline Fox and he, as if by mutual consent, drew back from each other, after they had acknowledged a certain amount of earlier acquaintance. Somehow Christopher was not himself beside the Misses Fox. He was stiff and formal, if not embarrassed.

Ellen could not understand it, after Christopher's praise of the strangers. Could it be that he was so sensitive—Ellen would not say silly—as to feel mortified by his position in the eyes of these women? They must remember him as a young man with the lingering distinction of having been one of the old family at the Park, and with the blushing honours of his promising art-student career still fresh and thick upon him, while it remained highly probable that he would rise to eminence as a painter in the course of a year or two.

Upwards of twenty years had passed, and Ellen and Christopher himself were the sole representatives of the forlorn hope which continued to

believe that he had the doing of great things in him, and surely would not go down to the grave leaving not one done—not a single picture to vindicate his latent power. Whatever might be the discordant element, Christopher was far from being at his happiest beside the Foxes, and the circumstance that they caused him discomposure set Ellen still more violently against the sisters.

Cuthbert could not be said to exhibit any share of the evil influence. He did not thaw greatly, but neither did he congeal more, and he always laid himself out to have as much as he could of Louisa Fox's music. But Ellen thought nothing of that, when nearly everybody was ready to enjoy what she owned to be a natural gift in the little woman.

After a sufficient time had passed to write to London, receive an answer, and have a morning's practising by way of precaution, Louisa Fox committed the enormity of singing "Kathleen O'More" to the assembled company so charmingly, that Cuthbert's gratitude, if she had inspired him with such a feeling, was lost in the general enthusiasm. He had not even the trouble of asking for his song in future, so many others were before him in begging for it.

Ellen wondered, with a curl of the lip, how many people knew even that her uncle Cuthbert had the merit of suggesting that song. Yet it was not his fault that he had put Miss Louisa Fox

to the trouble of sending to London for a song, and learning it for his benefit. His simple inquiry had by no means implied a hint at such an effort on her part. What a gross piece of flattery, what an indelicate approach to courting Cuthbert the step was! That it was thoroughly wasted on him Ellen had the most assured confidence, which was not shaken to any appreciable extent when Miss Phyllis drew her contrary inference, after she had been at the Park one evening, and had sat opposite her eldest brother, while Miss Louisa was singing as sweetly as a thrush:—

"She milked the dun cow which ne'er offered to stir,
Though wicked to others, 'twas gentle to her;
So kind was my Kathleen, my dear little Kathleen—
My Kathleen O'More.

* * * * *

The bird of all birds that I love the best
Is the Robin, which in the churchyard builds its nest;
For it seems to love Kathleen, hops lightly o'er Kathleen—
My Kathleen O'More."

Miss Phyllis sat still in stony wrath for a full quarter of an hour, while her great brown eyes glowered uncannily at Louisa Fox, till the little woman fairly shook with excitement and trepidation. At last Phyllis Hatherley relieved her feelings by casting consistency to the winds, and whispering to the very person whose improperly obtained early information on the subject the speaker had scouted.

"That woman is a siren, Ellen, mark my words; we must beware of her."

It might be too late to beware; but Ellen did not see it in the least, while she laughed to herself and relished the victory she had won over her aunt, though Miss Phyllis's running from one extreme to the other was without reasonable grounds, and her suddenly roused apprehensions for Cuthbert were purely ridiculous.

Ellen was rendered still more insensible to danger by the circumstances of another visitor's appearance at the Park. It was a gentleman this time, and strange to say, if Mrs. Bellamy had not been the hostess, another old acquaintance. He was a retired army surgeon, who remembered having met the late General Fox out in India. Mr., or—as Mrs. Bellamy persisted in calling him without dreaming of disrespect—Dr. Fothergill Thompson, had been more lucky than the officer of higher rank in speculating and acquiring a small fortune before he came home and married. He was at present a widower in happier circumstances than little Admiral Halket, for Dr. Fothergill Thompson's family consisted entirely of boys, half fledged and already started from the parent nest. As an old medical man, bound in his day to study the humours of his patients, among whom had been officers' wives as well as officers, the retired army surgeon was a great deal blander, with a hundred times more to say to ladies, for a man of his age, than Cuthbert Hatherley had shown himself.

Dr. Fothergill Thompson was also fond of music, and hovered about Miss Louisa Fox, who was not sufficiently hard-hearted to dismiss him summarily, until Ellen added to her other accusations against the lady the charge of being an old flirt. And it might be that the inveterate propensity for smilingly accepting, and never rejecting, the various attentions pressed on her by a heterogeneous host of admirers, had been one of the principal rocks on which Louisa Fox's matrimonial prospects had sustained shipwreck.

Ellen went blindly to meet her fate in spite of the warnings she had received. It came upon her like a thunderbolt, when Cuthbert, after he had taken to paying morning visits by himself instead of sitting reading his newspaper in his library, or walking about his fields with his bailiff, came into the Brasbœuf drawing-room one afternoon, on his return from staying to luncheon at the Park, and without preamble or circumlocution, or any minute detail, made a startling communication. He said he had the pleasure to tell her, what her aunts at the Cottage knew already, and what she ought to know also, that he had proposed to Miss Louisa Fox and been accepted. As there was no cause for delay, the marriage would take place in September.

Ellen had been playing on the piano when her uncle entered the room, and had only lifted her hands from the keys and turned round on the

music-stool to listen. There she sat arrested, staring at Cuthbert, not able to believe her ears for a few seconds, till the intending bridegroom, who had not betrayed the faintest shade of emotion in his first announcement, but had delivered it as if it were a matter of course, began to look a little put out. "I know it will make a difference to you, Ellen," he said awkwardly, "though I shall do what I can to atone for it; and you are too sensible a girl to wish to oppose what is for my happiness."

Before this speech was finished Ellen sprang up. "Of course not, Uncle Cuthbert," she hurried out. "You have every right to make yourself happy in your own way. Pray don't mind me. I shall be delighted to go home to the Cottage. I thank you for all your kindness, and—and—I wish you much joy."

It was the most insincere wish Ellen ever expressed. But what could she say? It was not for her to tell her uncle Cuthbert that he was making a fool of himself by becoming the prey of a designing woman, with her *bons partis* and her "Kathleen O'Mores," who, after she had cut him in his adversity, had come back among them, deliberately planning his capture, since he was rich and could provide her with a handsome establishment, rather than a happy home—the last words were disgraced by the association. If Ellen could have so spoken to Cuthbert, the time for such speaking had long gone by.

Miss Louisa Fox was to oust Ellen, and reign at Brasbœuf in the rooms, and the grounds, and over the servants, to be mistress of the phaeton, very likely of the pony—on all of which Ellen had learned to set store.

It was not, it could not be, that Ellen was really sorry to return to the home and the friends of her youth, to that friend of friends, Christopher, whom she had been so loath to leave. It would sink her fathoms deep in her own esteem if she could believe for a moment that the worldly advantages, ease, and luxury of Brasbœuf had, in the short interval, seriously estranged her from what she had known so much longer, and felt at the bottom of her heart was so much better—old fidelity, and the great example of a true life's unswerving aim.

But it was mortifying to the girl to be superseded by an elderly manœuvrer and adventuress, though she could still sing sweetly, and not by one of those young, beautiful, supernaturally clever enchantresses with whom Ellen had not been able to escape a slight familiarity in modern novels. For though Miss Phyllis had called Louisa Fox a siren, the victorious conqueror of Cuthbert was no more than a middle-aged conspiratress of the most commonplace description. The only thing wonderful about her was her success.

Everybody would pity and very likely laugh at Ellen ; and she hated to be either pitied or laughed

at. It was not pleasant to miss what she had so soon grown accustomed to; but it was far worse to be shocked and grieved at the extent of Cuthbert's weakness and credulity, at the manner in which he, to whom his elder sisters had looked up as the head of the family, who had been strong enough in his day to fight the world single-handed, and retrieve in a measure the fortunes of the Hatherleys, had ended by becoming the sport and victim of a little chirping, warbling, intriguing old maid.

Cuthbert left Brasbœuf for a week's stay in London on the very evening of his engagement. It might be from a tacit admission of the difficulties of the situation, it might be in order to give immediate directions for settlements. It was a wedding in which there was nothing to wait for—rather no time to lose. Or it might very well be only to take himself off from the first storm of exclamations, protests, congratulations, and laughter, which bursts on an elderly bachelor, alike from kindred and acquaintances, when the earliest reliable news of his intended change of state is published.

Ellen was of course at liberty to drive over, in the dignity which had become forlorn, now that its days were numbered, to the Cottage, where she felt sure of sympathy at least.

The sisters had hardly recovered from the stunning effects of the news, which Cuthbert had told

them with as little preparation and as briefly as he had given the information to Ellen.

Miss Hatherley sat with her hands in her lap and marvelled—as many another woman, more plentifully furnished with ideas, and endowed with brighter intelligence than Sophy Hatherley possessed, has marvelled in similar circumstances—what Cuthbert could have seen in Miss Louisa Fox—a girl who had no good looks to speak of, or merely such as were of the most ordinary description, to induce him to “enter into an alliance” with the Foxes, and confer on the younger of the two the honour of becoming the wife of one of the old Hatherleys of the Park, and the master of Brasbœuf.

Miss Anne puzzled and blundered over the event. She could not see how the attachment and engagement had come about. Cuthbert must have been exceedingly close—but then he was always close. Had he said anything to Ellen? No, nothing? That was so like Cuthbert. The Foxes made a good appearance on their limited income, and had always dressed very well, which no doubt had something to do with it. She supposed they must make the best of the connection, which was not so bad after all—a friend of the Bellamys, the daughter of a general, an old acquaintance of their own. Louisa Fox was not a nobody whom they had not seen till yesterday, or a girl of Ellen’s age. For when elderly men

took it into their heads to marry, there were no bounds to the stupidity and absurdity even of the wisest of them. Miss Anne only hoped Chris would not follow his brother's example.

Miss Phyllis looked the most hurt, as indeed she was the most sensitive of the three—the one who had exalted Cuthbert to the highest pinnacle in her imagination, who had built the airiest castles on Ellen's behalf—even if Phyllis had not received the damaging knowledge which caused the blow to fall with double heaviness on her. Phyllis's sallow complexion had acquired a jaundiced tint; her fingers, usually so busy, were as idle as her sister Sophy's. She sat preserving the same sort of stony silence as she had fallen into when the suspicion struck her—what Kathleen O'More and her singer might do for Cuthbert. Phyllis broke her silence to snap up Anne. Make the best of Cuthbert's proposed marriage? what should they do but make the best of it? He was his own master. Nobody had any right to interfere. The Foxes were not old friends of the Hatherleys, she had told Anne that twenty times. Christopher follow his brother's example! who would have him Phyllis would like to know? His pictures had not earned, and would never earn, another Brasbœuf to cause him to be plotted against.

"Oh! Phyllis, you don't mean that Louisa—I suppose we must all call her Louisa

now"—said Anne, looking round with a half-simper, "does not care for Cuthbert for his own sake? He is not so old as that comes to; he is younger than any of us, and although he is getting a little stout, he is not at all a bad-looking man for his years, and she is so agreeable to everybody, it seems as if she would be easily pleased."

"Anne, don't be an idiot," said Phyllis in her provocation, with even more pettishness and less politeness than were natural to the plain-spoken woman.

"Phyllis, I am astonished at you," exclaimed Miss Hatherley in stately, severe reprobation, "to allow yourself to speak so to your sister, before Ellen too!"

"I wish to speak to you, Ellen," said Miss Phyllis, rising suddenly and leading the way to the very room which she had vacated so promptly for Cuthbert's benefit, and which had undergone such transformations that it had never been quite restored to its old suitability for her own requirements. Phyllis shut the door and stood with Ellen in the middle of the floor, too engrossed with her own object in coming there, in too great a haste to speak what she had to say, to think of seats.

"Yes, Ellen, you were right and I was wrong," she began with a candour which brought penitent tears into Ellen's eyes—all the sooner that one tear and then another welled out of Phyllis's brown eyes and flowed down the cheeks in which

Ellen first saw, at this moment, that there were traces of old channels which dried-up tears had dug deep. "I don't know that it would have made much difference if I had taken you up, and we had set ourselves to circumvent that woman. Men, especially men like Cuthbert, won't brook interference and contradiction when they have made up their minds to their own destruction. What I have brought you here for, Ellen, is to say that we must never breathe a word—not even to your other aunts—of what you heard in the railway carriage. It is not for us to expose the schemes and tricks by which Cuthbert has been betrayed—to pluck down our house about our ears and wash our dirty linen in public—no, not in the small public of the family here. I am sorry I let out what I did before Anne and Sophy—that about plots against Cuthbert. But they are up-right, single-hearted women, Ellen; they could not take in the despicable truth without farther explanation, and we will not expose him, child, or bring him to any scorn that we can help. Of course we may have our own opinion of her. We need not have more intercourse with her than we can avoid, and we need not care though the world say it is spite—the usual grudge against a sister-in-law, and all the rest of it. Nothing will make us tell the real ground of our condemnation. Promise me, Ellen."

Ellen promised solemnly, touched at once by

Miss Phyllis's confidence in her and her aunt's generosity, but more indignant than ever with the future Mrs. Cuthbert.

Christopher had the advantage of having learnt the impending event hours before he saw Ellen, since it was not one of his Birmingham days, and he had been in the way when Cuthbert looked in, during the earlier part of the day, and took away his audience's breath by his high-handed proclamation.

What private feelings and associations the announcement had aroused in Christopher were all rigorously put out of sight, from the most distant chance of discovery, before he saw Ellen with her doleful, affronted face, which tempted him to laughter. It was abominable in Christopher to laugh at what was no laughing matter, though he remained unaware of the worst feature in the case. How could a good man be so provoking? And he would not give over "sniggering," as he called it, after Ellen had got him to herself in his studio. Instead he cried, "Let me get out my laugh, Ellen; I have been keeping it in all day, in consideration for your poor aunts' long faces. You have pulled one nearly as long—only girls' faces are elastic. It is so comical to think of old Cuddie sold, booked at his time of life, with his knowledge of the world, matched, too, with little Louisa Fox, who cut him dead at the Addington election—an operation of which

he gave us a succinct history only the other day. Don't you remember? The affair had lingered in his memory. Well, she has made him amends, and I hope the fellow has no intention of punishing her after twenty years. Are you, too, of the opinion that she will talk him deaf, or that her tongue will ache with lying still, before the honeymoon is over?"

"Uncle Chris, you are incorrigible," said Ellen, after the pattern of Phyllis.

Then Christopher grew a little more serious. "Poor young woman!" he said, "it is a little hard on you to be turned adrift and tossed about in this manner, just after you had settled down comfortably; and I began to think you were coming out strong as the mistress of Brasbœuf."

"Uncle Christopher, do you think I mind for myself?" began Ellen hotly, and then her entire truthfulness stopped her. "Yes, I do mind for myself," she corrected herself impetuously. "I was happy here, before Uncle Cuthbert came back. You know how sorry I was to go away and keep house for him. But you all talked me over to go. I shall be happy again here presently. I don't doubt that. I am not so low, so ungrateful and heartless as that would come to. Still Brasbœuf grew to be nice; there are many nice things there, and I don't deny it is hard to step down from the post to which I was promoted, and give up all, especially to another woman. But it is

not that principally—indeed it is not; you will believe me, Uncle Chris, that will soon be forgotten, though I hanker for a moment after the flesh-pots of Egypt. I have always been really a great deal happier, helping you with your paints and properties, than doing anything else—only I shall not be able to bring you any more greenhouse flowers and hothouse fruit, or to pick up odd bits of brass and copper and old china for you in Addington,” reflected Ellen plaintively. “But you must understand, Uncle Chris,” she began again with renewed energy, “the great grievance is that Uncle Cuthbert should go and make a fool of himself and marry, at his age, a woman like Miss Louisa Fox.”

“Are you sure Cuthbert has made a fool of himself, or that he has not rather done the best thing possible for himself at this date? He has not shown himself so incapable of looking after his own interests hitherto. He is a year or two from fifty still. He may very well—I sincerely trust he will—have another score of years’ experience and enjoyment of this world. Let us hear what is the latest age at which boys and girls find wedlock permissible for us?”

“Miss Louisa Fox is upwards of forty,” said Ellen with great decision and fine scorn.

“Just so, and Cuthbert is six or eight years older, a sufficient disparity to insure him respect and no more. You cannot say they are ill matched.”

"How can you say so?" protested Ellen vehemently. "But there is no use in arguing with you, Uncle Christopher, when you are in some of your moods."

"Well, don't let us argue. Let us agree. She is a chatterbox, and he is a dumb bell in the domestic circle. The one will serve to balance the other. About a fair proportion of speech will be got between them."

Ellen did not deign to reply.

Christopher leapt off the table on which he had been sitting, while his niece was leaning back in the sitter's chair. He moved about and handled things here and there. "You don't like Louisa Fox, Ellen?" he suggested.

"No," she answered unreservedly.

"Nor her sister Caroline?"

"No," she repeated, though with less emphasis.

"What harm do you know of them?"

Ellen hesitated. She was bound by her promise to Miss Phyllis, and by her own instinctive delicacy in speaking of women to men.

"I cannot tell," she answered evasively. "I suppose they are not my style of women—I mean, they are not the sort of women I can admire—to whom I can look up, though they are so many years older than I."

"In short, they are not heroines, but mere human beings—fellow-women, guilty of being forty and odd years to boot, so your good-will to

your kind can find nothing to say to them," said Christopher.

"Is this marriage not sufficient warrant for my dislike?" asked Ellen. "You do not mean to pretend that she has a romantic attachment to Uncle Cuthbert, that she is marrying him for anything except Brasbœuf?"

"I judge no man or woman either. I wish to make allowance, and to teach you, if possible, to make allowance for some things. Old Major or General Fox *père* was a worldly old fox—not clever enough to be wily, but pertinacious as Reynard when he has a tender young lamb or a fat old goose in his eye. The greater part of these sisters' early lives, after they had lost their mother, was spent between boarding-schools and boarding-houses. The girls must have craved for a home of their own, but when they got it they were middle-aged women, pinched by narrow means. The elderly feel that much more than the young; the burden and heat of the day press heavily on them. It is more natural for them to cling to, or clutch at, comfort, ease—the satisfaction of not having painfully to reckon and re- reckon every farthing they spend, and to check themselves at the end. Young people do not think of all that. But can you not realise, in a degree, what a temptation a good sure home, with its freedom, security, and abundance, may be to women in their circumstances?"

"It is a disgraceful thing in a woman to marry for a home at any age." Ellen laid down the law as dogmatically as if she had sat at strangers' boards and been worried by poverty till she was grey-headed.

Christopher went on undauntedly. "All but exceptional women desire at some time to marry. It is their vocation. Don't interrupt me, Ellen. I mentioned—I even laid stress on exceptional women. But I was going to add that the more commonplace a woman is, the more she is haunted by the only vision of her youth, by the call to fulfil the destiny of her sex. She cannot forget the former coarse gibes at old maids. The recollection of them survives with her as an abiding taunt. It is 'now or never' with her—only the 'now' is perennial and the 'never' fails to put in an appearance. She does not lose hope to the last. Are you surprised still that she should snatch at the chance which changes hope into fulfilment?"

"Uncle Chris, you are impertinent," his niece told him plainly. "Do you mean to say that my aunts still contemplate marriage as a possible honour, and not, as it would really be, a degradation to them, even in the world's eyes? For though the world is mercenary and coarse enough, it does not put such an inordinate weight on a woman being a man's choice and belonging to him, as to regard with moderately favourable, not to say respectful eyes, an old maid's marriage."

"You are looking from your own side of the question and your own side of the world, my dear; and a man's sisters should always be put *hors de combat* in such an argument. Don't you know he begins by finding it rather vexatious and preposterous that they should think of marriage, even in their youth, unless he is a beast who does not care about them, or desires to get rid of them? I remember when Phyllis—but that is an old story. However, for the sake of the universality of the law, we'll take in your aunts—except Phyllis. She is the exceptional woman, and she had her story, poor soul! properly worked out an age ago. But as for Sophy and Anne, I declare I am not sure of them yet," with an uncontrollable chuckle over the idea. "What does Sophy mean by always sticking to her old colours, and looking as if she had just come out of a bandbox? As for Anne, she rebels against Phyllis's rules, and loads the table with good things, when there is the faintest chance of a male visitor, an old contemporary turning up."

"For shame, Uncle Chris!" Ellen rebuked his levity, successfully restraining a laugh on her own account. "You know Aunt Anne does not care whether your old friends are married or unmarried."

"What! You don't think she is guilty of planning any worthy matron's death and proposing herself as the successor? But it was not

of Anne's problematical, it was of Cuthbert's all but accomplished marriage that we were talking. Ellen, I am afraid I have fallen into the bad habit of treating you as a chum, and must have spoilt you horribly. I am going to do my best now to atone for it by speaking at you as the representative of your sex. It is extraordinary and melancholy to me to observe the shocking bugbears women make of each other—the bitter hatreds they take up, the cruel mischief they do—for you do nothing by halves; and when the foundation of the evil is investigated the original offence is discovered to be some 'trifle light as air.' "

"You don't mean to say that Miss Louisa Fox's marrying Uncle Cuthbert is a 'trifle light as air?' " remarked Ellen obstinately.

"Nobody has any business with their marrying each other, except themselves. What I mean to say is, that Louisa Fox—I knew her tolerably well twenty years ago—is a thoroughly good-natured, kindly woman, perfectly well disposed, though she may not be so high-minded as a girl would wish. I consider myself an impartial judge, for she once did me an ill turn—or what I thought then was an ill turn—though I have come to see not only that she intended to act for the best, but that she could not well have acted otherwise. Louisa Fox is high-minded enough, doubtless, for Cuthbert, who never gave himself out, that I ever heard of, as going in for complete

disinterestedness and unworldliness. She has a comely person and a sweet voice, though these are still more Cuthbert's affairs. Any reasonable man might be fairly happy with her, unless her tongue proved too great an infliction—but that again is Cuthbert's look-out. Any reasonable woman might get on—that is the correct expression—with Louisa Fox, as a sister-in-law or aunt-in-law. I think she might prove quite an agreeable variety of aunt for you, Ellen. I know she would be kind to you if you would let her."

"No, thanks, Uncle Christopher," declined Ellen with great loftiness and a swelling heart. "I am not reduced to being laid under an obligation by her kindness. Will you not believe that a woman, even a girl, may see through another woman better than a man can see?" said Ellen angrily, forgetting her promise and her loyalty to sister women.

"Not when prejudice and passion step in, and blind her eyes. But, good heavens! what is the row about?" broke out Christopher again impatiently. "An elderly Corydon stumbles upon an elderly Chloe, and fancies he will be the more cheerful for her company. The two are of the same mind—that they will do better to spend the rest of their lives together than apart. Who has done amiss? Who is wronged? Why should the harmony of the situation be marred, and future

ineradicable dissension sown, because of a little pique and a passing mortification?"

"You don't understand, Uncle Chris." Ellen made the unanswerable observation which virtually closes all such well-meant remonstrances.

"I hope your aunts will have more sense than you, you silly girl," retorted Christopher with unwonted asperity to his chum and champion. "I thought you were less small; that you had more generosity and magnanimity in your character, Ellen."

An accusation of littleness, of a want of generosity and magnanimity, from Christopher, of all people, was stinging to Ellen; and a sting was not the most judicious weapon for a peace-maker to use as a wind-up to his efforts—but who does not bungle in doing his best? And the truest, even the tenderest, men and women are often the least judicious. This was a huge addition to the heap of injuries being piled up between Ellen and Louisa Fox.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FATE OF WEAK COMPROMISES.

IF Ellen had possessed some of the peculiar gifts and privileges of Le Sage's hero, and had been permitted to penetrate unseen to one of the rooms appropriated to the Misses Fox at the Park, at that hour of retiring to rest which is sacred to confidences, she might have heard something which would have surprised her.

It had been an agitating day for Louisa Fox—not the less agitating that she was a mature spinster when she found herself called upon to meet it. She had been looking forward to it during more than half her forty-one years. For she at least was one of the women who came under Christopher's definition of regarding marriage, justly, as her vocation, and of still contemplating the prospect with a fond if desperate tenacity. Here as elsewhere lingering hope kept alive despair, since the more the hope receded into the background, the less possible rather than probable its realisation appeared to both hoper and bystanders.

But even the shadow of despair in attaining

what had been the paramount object of her life did not render Louisa Fox sour or harsh, or even pensive. She was as bland as a sound nut, and as merry as a cricket. So she won her prize at last, in a flutter of pleasure and wonder, which was half doubt still, and half excitement and exultation at her own ultimate success. She had so often anticipated the situation, that she felt quite familiar with it in one sense. It was like living over again a thoroughly realised scene in her life. But, as happens always, the actual event was not quite the same as in anticipation. There were elements in it which Louisa Fox had not calculated upon; and what between the old, or at least the rehearsed feelings, and the new and strange sensations, poor little Louisa felt somewhat knocked up by the evening. Perhaps, though we are still only in the middle of life at forty-one, we are not quite so able to stand a sudden avalanche of varied experiences and sensations as we were at twenty.

First, there had been Cuthbert's proposal in form, which came abruptly in the end, though it had been not merely expected with some assurance for the last ten days or so at the Park, but Miss Louisa had entertained a faint foreshadowing of it long before, earlier even than her conversation in the railway carriage. Her vague prevision of what was to happen dated from the reception of a letter from Mrs. Bellamy, in which,

along with a cordial invitation to the two sisters, there had been an account of Cuthbert Hatherley's return from India with a fortune, and his establishment at Brasbœuf. Louisa was now inclined to view the dim idea which had then dawned upon her mind with a little superstitious awe, as a species of supernatural intimation of what followed. But if she had inquired into the matter more particularly, she would have found that she had entertained hundreds of such idle happy dreams which had come to nothing.

However, Louisa Fox's last vision was destined to a more honourable conclusion. It became a tolerably sanguine, and yet a tremulous conviction after she had procured "Kathleen O'More" and sung it to Cuthbert. She had asked him aside—shyly for her—if she had sung it right, if he liked it from her? And he had answered with sincerity, and a grain of restrained earnestness and friendliness, which struck her justly as meaning more than the words, "You have sung it very well indeed. I am exceedingly obliged to you. There is nothing I can ask better than to hear you sing that song."

Notwithstanding everything, the proposal itself—as proposals when they are premeditated, and that for some time, are apt to do—took the lady somewhat by surprise. Louisa, in her naturally wide graciousness, and in the humility taught by a dearth of proposals which ought to

have reached her over and over again, and yet which had somehow failed to be spoken, had been a good deal diverted from her anticipations by Dr. Fothergill Thompson's polite attentions. There had been nothing in them beyond professional agreeability, and constitutional gallantry to a woman who was still attractive, though she was confessedly elderly. Yet they had been the spur which had brought Cuthbert to the point.

Cuthbert's call, and straightforward request for an interview with Miss Louisa Fox, though it had been hopefully waited for, more or less, for a week, created a genuine sensation at the Park, so great and fully recognised is the difference between a fact foreseen and a fact accomplished.

At the close of the interview, which was reasonably short, everybody, great and small, knew, what everybody had been sure of beforehand, that Mr. Cuthbert Hatherley had asked Miss Louisa Fox to marry him, and Miss Louisa had done him the honour to say yes. Even Cuthbert made no secret of the business he had been about, but faced the consequences as the coming bridegroom, before he beat a retreat from his strictly limited share of the congratulations with which Louisa—for she was a popular person—was overwhelmed. It was instinctively felt that the woman highly enjoyed what the man merely endured.

But there may be too much even of a good

thing ; and after Louisa had been warmly kissed by the delighted Mrs. Bellamy, and cordially shaken by the hand, till her wrist ached, by Mr. Bellamy, and significantly smiled upon by everybody—after the bride elect had written post haste half-a-dozen letters, to convey the charming news of the happiest event of her life to as many confidential friends—after she and Mrs. Bellamy had rushed into deep discussions of the trousseau and the wedding, and talked silks and cashmeres, Gunter's breakfasts, and St. George's, Hanover Square, or St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, till the ladies gave themselves bad headaches, Louisa found herself a little fagged, flat, and confused. It was as if her excellent, most suitable engagement must prove a fiction after all, especially as Cuthbert, who had never, on his part, rehearsed the morning's work, and who had therefore failed to provide himself with an engagement ring—a solid token at which Louisa might have looked, and felt reassured, when she grew tempted to doubt her happiness and the dignity before her—was gone not to return for a week.

Altogether Louisa felt glad when the happiest day of her life was over. Mrs. Bellamy had bidden her good night with *empressement* and an anxious entreaty that she would sleep well, which showed that Louisa had already become an illustrious personage, whose repose and health were of the utmost importance. Mr. Bellamy had cracked his

old-fashioned joke about the nature of her dreams. And the fortunate woman was glad to find herself in retirement and quietness in her bedroom. The room was *en suite* with Lina's room, so that after she had rested a little from the delightful fatigues of the day, she could go to her sister and have a long cosy chat about everything, which would be the best rest of all.

Nothing has been said of Caroline Fox's interest in the question and answer of the morning, which was to transform Louisa's whole life from that moment. In truth, Caroline had said very little on the occasion, though the two were sisters, alone in the world, well known to be on the best terms, and affectionately attached to each other, while it was fully believed that Miss Fox did not at all disapprove of the unexceptionable match for her younger sister. The fact that Caroline was Miss Fox should have added the one further inducement to a more active share in the proceedings, a louder demonstration than she had made. But Caroline Fox was as quiet and reserved a woman as Louisa was talkative and communicative; and Caroline had been heard to say with some trace of emotion, "If it be for your happiness, by all means yes, Louisa, my dear. I wish you much joy, and may God bless you both," which was held quite satisfactory from Caroline.

But Caroline did not wait for Louisa's visit in the privacy of their rooms. She came in quickly

in her dressing-gown, looking smaller, paler, and younger, with the pathetic youthfulness which sometimes haunts a faded face, in the loose red shawl cape, and skirt, and wide sleeves, out of which her little hands appeared dainty and fragile as children's hands. But in spite of appearances there was nothing helpless about these hands, or about the woman herself. On the contrary, she was a very helpful as well as capable woman, whenever she found a sufficient opening. She had rather rusted and pined, in the dearth of aid to render, and work to do. She took the authoritative protecting elder sister's tone at once. She scolded Louisa briskly for letting herself drop into a chair in her evening dress. Caroline had the gown off, and the fellow of her own dressing-gown on, in a minute. Then she began to pet and wait on Louisa, insisting on being allowed to brush out and twist up her still abundant fair hair. "You know I shall not be able to do it often again, Louie, when you and I are to part company at last."

"What!" exclaimed Louisa, sitting up with a gasp. "Part company, Lina! what can you mean? Of course you are coming with me to Brاسبœuf. It is all settled. It is to be a home for you as well as for me. I said something to him about our never having been separated, you and I, and he said there was no occasion for it. There was room enough at Brاسبœuf. You were perfectly welcome; he hoped you would be happy. Indeed,

he said all that was necessary and right, and Mrs. Bellamy and I have talked of it ever so often this afternoon. It makes my marriage so much nicer, that I am leaving nothing behind. It is not like a girl quitting her home and family—you are my family, and we have often said it was home anywhere when we were together. It is all arranged, Lina; there is not a single objection to be made,” ended Louisa with recovered pride and pleasure.

“Not from the person principally concerned, Loo? That is nonsense,” said Caroline with a smile which she strove to render cheerful. “I should never think of living in a brother-in-law’s house,” she added with decision. “Now don’t pull yourself away in that fashion, else I shall not be able to help tearing half of your hair out, and though there is plenty of it—pretty fair hair—not unlike what you had when you were a child, it is not so luxuriant that as much as that can be spared, above all in a bride. You have not forgotten the newly married lady we met when we first came here, and how you pitied her for her unfortunate throat, and the too-marked parting in her front hair?” Caroline was speaking twice as much as usual, to break the force of her announcement.

“I never heard of such a thing,” cried Louisa incoherently. “Where on earth did you come upon such a scruple? Though I know you have always been fond of fancies and fads, Lina I,

cannot imagine how this can have entered into your head. It is the commonest thing in the world for two sisters, who have lived always together as we have done, and who have no other near kindred, to continue to live together after the marriage of one of the two."

"And I hope it is also a common thing," said Caroline, "particularly when the sisters have reached the years of discretion, for the one who is left alone in the single state to make up her mind to the desertion, and dwell by herself in old-maidish propriety and precision, rather than intrude herself into the married couple's household."

"There would be no intrusion," maintained Louisa. "I never thought of anything else."

"And I never thought of anything else," echoed Caroline. "It is simply out of the question, my dear child. It is very kind of you to wish it; but, as I said, I should never think of living in a brother-in-law's house, and least of all when that brother-in-law is to be Mr. Cuthbert Hatherley."

"Why not Mr. Cuthbert Hatherley? Do you not like him? Do you not trust him?" cried Louisa breathlessly, looking alarmed as well as impatient and vexed.

She had withdrawn from her sister's hand, though her hair was still hanging about her shoulders, and she had turned round to look Caroline in the face.

Caroline, standing there, met the look without flinching, though a slight colour came into her cheeks.

"Oh! I know now," said Louisa with a sudden inspiration; "it is because of that wretched out-of-date story about you and Christopher Hatherley. How can you be so foolish, dear old Lina? But is it possible that you have borne malice all this time? Oh, Lina! I could never have thought it of you," protested the little woman reproachfully, "especially after you have acknowledged to me, more than once, when I put it to you, that I could not have done anything else than agree with Mrs. Bellamy that poor papa should get a hint of what might happen. Nothing could have come of it, absolutely nothing, to this day. It would have been the most utter throwing away of yourself—events have proved it—if you two had entered into an engagement then. Mrs. Bellamy is not a worldly woman, yet she always said that it was only too plain. You could never have been greatly in earnest or cared much. Though, like myself, you have not happened to marry yet, you met him again like a distant acquaintance."

"To be sure," said Caroline with cold carelessness, which might have been overdone. "How should we have met? You are right, there never could have been anything serious between us. Even apart from the failure of the bank, Christopher

Hatherley, since he was a younger son, was not made to be a marrying man any more than a successful painter. What should I have done with a man who could not be pricked or goaded into asserting himself? It was a short, brief, youthful delusion, Louie, which has scarcely left a trace behind it. All the same, I would rather not be indebted to Mr. Cuthbert Hatherley for a home."

"But it is very hard upon me," persisted Louisa with unsophisticated directness of speech, and actually threatening to become tearful, it might well be hysterical, on this crowning day of her life. "What am I to do? I never thought of giving you up. I can't give you up, Lina. How dull you would be by yourself in that half-house in Bryanstone Street, or in any other house, half or whole, in London or out of it. You never were the housekeeper. You will not be able to manage. You will be ruined," predicted Louisa piteously, "when we might all be so well off and happy at Brasbœuf."

"I will manage, and I shan't be ruined, never fear. I shall miss you dreadfully, of course, but I shall know that you are well and happy." ("At the summit of your ambition," had been on the tip of Caroline's tongue, but she held back the words, though Louisa would not have denied the inference, or minded it.) "I will contrive to be content."

"But I am not content," cried Louisa. "Oh !

Lina, how can you be so self-willed and stuck up, and I don't know what, as to spoil everything? Mrs. Bellamy says I have been the most fortunate woman in the world—at my age; but I don't care a pin for the good fortune if you are not to share it. When I have set my heart upon it, it is cruel, it is mean of you to refuse. It would have been far better if everything had remained as it was. When it comes to that, I would a great deal rather be an old maid with you, on our small income in Bryanstone Street, than a married woman with him on his wealth at Brasbœuf."

"My dear little Loo, don't talk such dreadful treason after what took place this morning," cried Caroline, between laughing and crying on her own account. "I value your love, and well I may, since it is my best possession," she said, stooping down and kissing her unwilling sister, for Louisa was as hurt and angry as it was possible for her to be with any one, above all with Lina, of whom she was not only very fond, but to whom she had deferred and looked up all their lives. Besides the wrath, which was a peculiarly uncomfortable and distracting sensation where Louisa Fox was concerned, both her vanity and her feelings had received a wound. A sharp disappointment had fallen upon her at the height of her glory. She was sitting there the picture of tragic distress, with her streaming eyes and her hair falling down in disorder, as unlike as

might be to the trim little woman in the becoming gowns and dainty caps, who ought by this time to have been resting her head in the tranquillity of complete victory on her pillow, sleeping the sweet sleep of the full attainment of

"Hopes, and wishes long subdued,
Subdued and cherished long."

Louisa herself had also at the bottom of her heart the anxious conviction that a good "beauty-sleep" was doubly necessary at her age, and that the wear and tear of such unwonted agitation as she was indulging should be sedulously avoided by her.

"Why did you not warn me, Lina, that you had made up your mind not to stay with me—with us? It was low of you, letting me get into a scrape which you could have prevented," said Louisa, waxing peevish under her conflicting griefs and cares, which were so inconsistent with a general jubilee. "You might at least have done that. There would have been some mark of affection in your telling me in time."

"Louisa, how could I? I was not even certain that Cuthbert Hatherley meant to make you an offer, and I have always objected to foolish speculations on such uncertain chances as men's attentions to women. Neither were his attentions marked. You two merely indulged in a mild flirtation, to which only his character lent any significance."

Caroline was too generous and too sensitive with regard to her sister to say more—to add the epithet “indelicate” to foolish speculations, or to recall what had passed in the railway carriage when Ellen Hatherley was in hearing. Yet the little incident, which had passed lightly long ago from Louisa’s easy, somewhat obtuse mind, still rankled in her sister’s memory.

“But what am I to do?” asked Louisa in helpless doleful accents, which were a striking contrast to her previous simple ecstasy. “I am sure I wish something would happen. I can’t take back my word, or pick a quarrel about nothing—it would be too dishonourable—but I am tempted to wish that somebody would fall ill or die.”

“Hush, hush, Loo,” cried Caroline; “I never dreamt you could be so wicked, child. What will you do? Why, have a beautiful marriage, as good as it is beautiful, and be happy for ever after, like the people in story books. Do be reasonable, as I propose to be. We are not two school-girls any longer; we are two middle-aged women.”

“You have often enough reminded me of that,” interrupted Louisa resentfully.

“Then you will not need to be reminded of it any longer—not after you are the comeliest of matrons. How you will like being at the head of a great comfortable country house, with plenty

to spend on nice pretty things, and plenty to give away too, for you will be a kind little Lady Bountiful! You will be the right woman in the right place, and do great credit to Cuthbert Hatherley's choice; and you have no idea how I shall enjoy seeing you at your best, Loo. For although I have no intention of settling myself as a fixture at Brasbœuf, I depend upon being permitted to pay you many a visit, and having my share in your prosperity, after all. Oh! you will be very happy, as you deserve to be, my pet, and none will be so glad as I."

Caroline set herself to reconcile her sister to her coveted destiny, in spite of the ache at her own heart, which was quite as much for words she could not say as for those she uttered cheerfully. She could not say what she knew to be true, that the separation between the sisters, over which Louisa was lamenting with sincere bitterness of heart, would not prove an abiding loss to Louisa. Not only was there no great depth in her sister's pleasant nature, but also, although the couple had been warmly attached to each other, there had never been that closest union of kindred hearts and sympathies, which makes severance like the rending asunder of life with the agony of death, which leaves behind a scar not to be effaced, and a blank never to be filled in this world.

Again, Caroline said nothing of the strong love

between Cuthbert and Louisa, which should take the place of every older yet less absorbing affection, for the very good reason that Caroline had no faith in such love in this case. She knew Louisa, and she made a shrewd guess as to Cuthbert's character and the state of his heart. Louisa would take kindly to any fairly worthy man who paid her the ardently desired, fervently prized compliment of asking her to become his wife, bear his name, and preside over his establishment. She would not only try to do her duty faithfully to him, because she was, as Christopher had sought to point out to Ellen, a very well-disposed, though not a particularly high-minded woman. She would begin to admire, like, and make much of him, and she would end by being as happily blinded and doting a wife as the heart of an ordinary man could desire. Yet, if it were on the cards that she should be left a widow, she might not be inconsolable or obdurate to the overtures of a second husband in her later middle age.

Cuthbert, who had been impelled to accept Louisa's homage from the beginning, would continue to accept and welcome it—on the sly, as it were—would come to look for it bashfully as a necessity of his life, and, in the sneaking way of some lords of the creation, would return it with constant, ample indulgence and occasional clumsy attentions. His relations had not understood

him ; his sisters had looked up to him from a distance ; his niece had been grateful and friendly. But it was left for Louisa to chatter to him fearlessly without waiting for an answer, to address him in terms of perfectly genuine endearment, even to bestow on him little conjugal caresses, and to reveal the astounding fact that the gruff, silent man was open to these approaches and liked them.

The couple would be really happy in their own way. Louisa would find a more natural and satisfactory head than her sister Caroline to love, honour, and obey. Cuthbert would discover a creature a thousand times more dependent on him than Ellen could ever have been, to care for ; to listen to, when he chose to listen ; to turn a deaf ear to, without offence, when he was otherwise inclined ; to tease a little when he deigned to tease ; to indemnify abundantly, by a word or a look, for the greatest provocation he could give her.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FAMILY UP IN ARMS.

THE next morning saw Louisa restored to much of her bright complacency, beginning the bustle of her preparations. Still she was sufficiently faithful to continue to regret Caroline's defection, and that was not the only drop of vinegar in Louisa's cup. Somehow matters did not work so well as she had credulously believed they would. Indeed, there were so many hitches, jars, and discords, that though Mrs. Bellamy remained determinedly satisfied, Caroline commenced to look grave, and to feel less assured of Louisa's future felicity.

Cuthbert was not in fault. He proved a taciturn, matter-of-fact bridegroom ; but he had been a taciturn, matter-of-fact man always, and Louisa had not objected. She did not object now, when to be sure it was all but too late. She was duly impressed and gratified by every visit he paid to her, she never wearied of singing to him. She was delighted with his liberal presents.

But though Louisa had broken down the

barriers between her and Cuthbert, and captured him with her lawful bow and spear, it by no means followed that she could do the same with regard to his family. On the contrary, it soon became clear enough that she could not, with all her innocent wiles and indefatigable attempts, displace a single stone of the dead wall between her and the Misses Hatherley. They had not instituted the slightest opposition. How could they when they had not the smallest right to control Cuthbert, when he was the head of the house, as they said constantly, and had done more than his duty by them, as they were equally ready to acknowledge with pride? They even consented, in the course of their duty to him, to a stately show of recognition of Louisa as their brother's future wife. But it was all show, nothing better than cold politeness, hardly hiding deeply rooted dislike and distrust.

Miss Hatherley and Miss Anne might not have been so inappeasable; but the fiery outraged spirits of Phyllis and Ellen, irresistible in combination, overpowered the others.

It was in vain that Louisa set herself earnestly, and at first cheerfully and hopefully, to practise all her winning ways, and laboured sedulously to establish peace and good-will between herself and her future relations. Peace might be on the Misses Hatherleys' tongues, but war—the more inveterate that it was civil war, subdued to silent hostility

and deadly courtesy—raged in the hearts of the ladies.

Miss Hatherley could not refuse the exquisitely soft and fine woollen shawl which Louisa, a very Arachne in such work, knitted expressly for her. But though it was just the warm, light, becoming shawl Sophy Hatherley had longed for, she never wore it; she would rather deny herself, old queen in her own right as she was, the comfort and adornment, than arouse the biting gibes of Phyllis and the indignant mortification of Ellen.

Anne broke every engagement she could be induced to form at the Park at this time, actually imperilling the long-subsisting friendly relations between the Park and the Cottage.

Miss Phyllis had butter on her lips, but a sharp sword between her teeth. Louisa did not always understand Phyllis's fiercely sarcastic civilities; but she had an unhappy consciousness of their cutting nature, so that the poor little woman could no longer be at her ease in such an atmosphere. She grew wistful, nervous, and disappointed in the failure of her endeavours.

It went to Caroline's heart, and awoke her sisterly partisanship, to watch Louisa looking as if she were saying piteously, "I have done all I can to please you, and you will not be pleased. Don't you believe me? Won't you forgive me? Yes, I am going to marry your brother, but if you would but let me, I would be a kind sister-in-law to you.

I would enliven what seems to me the dulness and monotony of your lives. I would remind Cuthbert of a hundred little attentions and gifts which you might like, and men always forget. I should feel so proud and gratified to know that you found yourselves no worse—rather much the better—for your new sister. Indeed, indeed, I don't want to keep all Cuthbert's possessions to myself; if you would share them, if you would take some of them from me—it is all that I should ask from you."

It was worst of all with Ellen—not that she forgot her youth and position, not that she was anything else than ominously quiet and punctiliously respectful. But it seemed so unnatural that a girl should not warm and thaw to Louisa, who had always been the sworn ally of girls. It pained the older woman more than she could express or understand, that this girl should obstinately resist her, and refuse to have anything to say to her, except formally as to an aunt-in-law who had intruded herself into the family, and who must be tolerated, even in a measure publicly honoured, on Cuthbert's account, but who could never be liked or confided in, or treated otherwise than as a stranger, an enemy, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

And this obstinate girl had been elected her uncle Cuthbert's housekeeper, and was the very person to whom Louisa was as ready as Mrs. Bellamy could wish, to own that special atone-

ment was due. Any little consolation which might have been derived from the circumstance that Ellen would be forced to accept her uncle's bounty, in presents which should replace her pocket-money, and in the arrangement that her pony should be accommodated in the offices of Courtfield Grange, and be kept there for her use, free from charge to the Misses Hatherley, was greatly impaired by the hot-headed defiance with which Ellen straightway launched into undertakings of the costliest, most superb work she could come across, to be solemnly presented as offerings for the bride's drawing-room at Brasbœuf.

"She is spending as much money in silk and velvet, and gold thread, as her quarter's income will come to," cried Miss Louisa in discomfiture and dismay. "That is not saying anything of her work, of which I know something, with the risk to her eyes and her back—girls' shoulders are so apt to come out when they sit long over a frame. I shall never forgive myself if Ellen Hatherley becomes blind or grows deformed. It would be nothing if it were done in kindness—that is, one might be pleased in the middle of the regret, and could take the liberty of kissing her, begging her to spare herself, and promising her ever so many girls' treats—parties in the winter and a long tour abroad next summer ; but it is all planned in revenge. You need not contradict me, Lina ; I am not such a goose as not to be aware of that.

I feel as if she would like to fling the banner-screens, and the cushions, and the footstools in my face. Yet she has been a well brought-up girl, is never out of church, teaches regularly in the Sunday-school, and has always helped Anne and Phyllis with the poor people, and been a good niece, Mrs. Bellamy says. It is horrid to have anybody—a girl above all—hate you so.”

The truth was that though Louisa Fox had been a good deal knocked about, and had lacked many most desirable things in her own girlhood, and in her maturer years, she had always lived in a genial, if somewhat Sadducean, atmosphere: she had been accustomed to be a favourite. It was the more so that her qualities were not too heroic, when the theatres of her social success were apt to be what are often classed as the selfish boards of hotel *tables d'hôte* and boarding-houses. She had been taught to look out for herself, to scheme for her own advantage; but the milk of human kindness in her heart had not been too much adulterated—it had still suited many palates.

Louisa Fox was a gentle, gracious being, after all, and she had been innocently vain and confident of her powers of pleasing, of her honest desire to live and let live, to do to her neighbours as she would be done by. Now, her reception by Cuthbert Hatherley's family did not so much disgust and alienate her, for she was a placable creature; but it chilled her, weighed upon her,

and caused her to droop a little in the heyday of her approaching marriage.

Phyllis and Ellen were to be present at the ceremony. They could not decently avoid granting this amount of their countenance, on the autumn morning in St. Paul's, Knightsbridge. When it came to that, Phyllis was anxious to conceal, for Cuthbert's sake, that she had any molehill to make a mountain of—any small cause to cast scorn at Cuthbert's bride.

Ellen succeeded in escaping being a bridesmaid, though Louisa had not only bought a dress for her, but had arranged all the bridesmaids' dresses, with rather an invidious reference to Ellen's style of figure and complexion. In the end, it was of no use that Louisa's cousins the Curtises, her old friends' daughters the Wainwrights, and Mrs. Bellamy's little grand-daughters, who all happened to be pale girls and children, looked positively wan and insignificant in the white and green and floating streamers and scarfs which would just have suited Ellen's bright colour and tall figure.

Miss Phyllis designed her own dress for the occasion, and here there was no malice. She sincerely intended to wear her best for "the young squire's" marriage. Any failure proceeded simply from a light error of judgment on her part, and an unwillingness to be dictated to, even on so trifling a matter as a question of dress, by a child like Ellen.

Phyllis had on one of the rich, quietly coloured silk gowns which the bridegroom, on the bride's secret suggestion, had given to each of his sisters. But Phyllis had thrown over it an imitation bernous, somewhat tight and short—an enterprising, and, as she was persuaded, a remarkably felicitous attempt to accomplish, in orange merino, and bold brilliant worsted embroidery of all colours, the fac-simile of a stylish opera cloak.

And it was entirely through an accident, fortuitous on the whole, that Phyllis was not able to speak many words, though she would have taken care that they should be sternly complimentary, during the day. Phyllis was indebted to a dentist for supplying the ravages of time among her teeth. Of course she chose to patronise a young dentist in Addington, whom she was starting, by her custom, in his business. His work was apt, as yet, to fail at inconvenient seasons. On Cuthbert's wedding morning, Phyllis suddenly found herself, amidst the excitement and lamentations of her sisters and niece, minus two important front teeth. But she was equal to that or any other emergency. She had a supply of wax, and out of this she immediately manipulated clever copies of the teeth, with which she filled up the unsightly blanks. The drawback was that, in addition to a certain clumsiness and blue whiteness which detracted somewhat from the merits of the copies, they were for show, not for use. They could not

be either spoken or eaten with, unless the greatest circumspection were practised, or unless Miss Phyllis were prepared to face the catastrophe of swallowing them bodily. Thus she was gagged in spite of herself, and passed for a very silent, eccentrically dressed elderly lady.

Christopher had made no objection to acting as groomsman, whether or not it might be a distinct relief to him that Caroline Fox was not one of the bridesmaids. She chose, in a woman's modern fashion of taking on herself all sorts of responsibilities, to represent Louisa's mother—if not her father—to give away the bride, in which character Caroline accomplished the anomaly of the mother's looking younger than the daughter. Louisa, though her own numerous adherents protested that she looked "sweetly pretty" and "delicious" in her orange blossoms and ivory-white satin, was not a bride of youthful appearance, while certainly she seemed quite youthful enough for her bridegroom.

But Caroline, in the rôle of the mother, with the matronly peach-silk gown and the quiet lace shawl and white chip bonnet, as proper concessions to a bridal procession, wearing some of the stephanotis from Louisa's bouquet on her breast, was surely the youngest most steadfast, thoughtful, self-forgetful mother on whom a September sun ever shone, as she led a daughter to the altar.

Christopher had been an exception to the others

in not only refraining from betraying the faintest objection to his brother's choice, but in being evidently sincere in his good wishes.

Louisa had not much discrimination, but she instinctively detected the difference in Christopher, who alone possessed the shadow of a cause to show malice—though of course she had behaved in the only way possible for her, when the affair had been utterly impracticable. Yet Christopher only was unaffectedly agreeable and kind on the subject; and Louisa did not fancy for a second that he would, if he could, have pitched the antique lamp which he had procured for them, either at her head or at Cuthbert's. But unfortunately, Christopher's agreeableness and kindness stopped short of being so frank and hearty as to make way triumphantly against the smouldering hostility of the rest of the family, and to bear it down. This was not from any lurking grudge on his part, but because there remained a lingering shyness and awkwardness in his intercourse with the two sisters, which he was not the man to shake off. Had it been otherwise he might have done something to establish greater harmony between the new relatives. But as Caroline Fox reflected with the half weary, half bitter, impatient sigh that always attended any of her reflections in which Christopher Hatherley figured, he was not a man to be depended upon. There was some overmastering defect,

some rooted failure, in all he did or tried to do, which rendered him a broken reed where substantial help was wanted. He was a disappointment, a man of fine promises and fine qualities—even of genius; but either the qualities were too fine for this workaday world, or there was a fatal flaw in them which effectually baffled their supremacy.

It remained to be seen whether Cuthbert's support would be strong enough to sustain Louisa under the cool, well-bred, offensive, and defensive attitude assumed by the rest of the family—or whether the other Hatherleys' implacability would fret and worry the friendly little woman, till the little drop of vinegar tainted her whole full cup.

It was noticeable that Cuthbert behaved as if he saw nothing in the tone of the Cottage to his bride. Was he so obtuse, in the region of the feelings, as not to perceive the evil? He was a peculiarly undemonstrative man himself, and perhaps did not regard the silent, retiring manœuvres of his sisters and niece as unnatural, or as proceeding from the bad side of human nature. Or was it his policy to meet tacit unfriendliness with tacit indifference?

CHAPTER XV.

THE BEGINNING OF STRIFE IS AS THE LETTING
OUT OF WATER.

CUTHBERT HATHERLEY'S marriage was an old event of six months' standing. Ellen's reign at Brasbœuf was as if it had never been, even in the girl's consciousness, except for the full introduction, in suitable form, to the world, which it had procured for her. This introduction continued in force, thanks to Cuthbert's unquestioning maintenance of his right, as the head of the family, to provide his ungrateful niece, against her will, with what was necessary for her, in order that she might mix in the society of her equals.

Several changes had taken place in the village and neighbourhood. Mr. Bellamy had endured what is called in an invalid's language "a bad winter," and was more infirm for it; and Mrs. Bellamy had at last coaxed one of her sons to settle with his wife and children at the Park, under pretext of helping to nurse its master, but really to provide a resident family, an abiding

circle of familiar faces, old and young, to gladden and be gladdened by both master and mistress.

The old vicar had died, and a new vicar reigned in his stead; a great event to any household, consisting mainly of elderly single women who are good Churchwomen, and who, though they are not in holy orders of any description, either as curates or deacons or deaconesses, have yet been accustomed to discharge a large proportion of such of the parson's work as is not confined to the lectern or the altar, to baptizing, marrying, or burying. The death of the Sovereign and the proclamation of his successor, the appointment of the Lord Chancellor, the dissolution of Parliament, with the prospect of the opposition's prevailing in the new elections, so as to involve a resignation and reconstruction of the ministry, would have been nothing to such households as the Hatherleys' in comparison with the death of old Mr. Mallet, and the appointment of young Mr. Curtis. For this living having been bought by Cuthbert as an appendage to Brasbœuf, had been presented by him to his wife's cousin, who had just taken orders. It was the simplest, most natural arrangement in such a case, the time-honoured family arrangement. But who shall tell the feelings which swelled the hearts of Miss Phyllis and Ellen when they heard of it unexpectedly? For they had not condescended to be so familiar with Louisa as to know she had a cousin in orders.

"This puts an end to our connection with the parish," said Phyllis with proud despair, as if she had been the vicar in her own person, under an unjust sentence of interdict from the Bishop.

"But what will the poor young man do without us?" cried Anne in the greatest perplexity and consternation. "You know we have always managed whatever lay in our province since dear old Mrs. Mallet died, and especially since dear old Mr. Mallet left the old vicarage and went out to the Beeches. Mrs. Bellamy never took up the work—she said it was so well done already, and we knew every man, woman, and child in the place. Indeed, Phyllis, I think it would be very wrong—a sin—to allow private feelings to interfere with public duties," protested Anne, almost in tears, roused from her usual lazy-minded submission. It was not merely that Miss Anne felt the withdrawal would be an unspeakable loss to the clergyman and his people; she was sensible her own vocation would be gone if she were forbidden to potter any longer about the schools, the winter soup kitchen, the almshouses, the club pennies. Miss Anne was by inclination and habit a benevolent woman, but she had also a perception of her own requirements. Phyllis was, with her usual high hand, cutting away the last ground from beneath the Misses Hatherleys' feet, robbing them of the pre-eminence in good works which they had still retained after they had lost the

Park, depriving them of all rule and power in the old dominion, reducing some of them to ciphers in their own eyes and in those of their neighbours—even wounding Anne's conscience.

"To whom is the new vicar to turn if not to us?" said Sophy, although she had never bestirred herself to do more for any vicar than go to church, and look gracious at school feasts. It was not her rôle to work for her retainers. In fact, her abstinence from all activity in the matter caused her to add, by way of qualification, "Not that I see any reason for you and Phyllis being at the vicar's call. It is his business to attend to the parish—charities and all. I think if you would sit still, and let him do it sometimes, it would be an advantage to everybody."

"Oh, Sophy, how can a man know—a strange young man especially?" cried Anne. "There is Mrs. Moon brought to bed with twins, both alive, this very morning; and how is he to distinguish between the two families of Laycocks, the one quite respectable, and the other very much the reverse, and both applying for tickets to the soup kitchen?"

"Let him apply to his relation, Mrs. Cuthbert," said Phyllis grimly.

"Now, Phyllis, you know that Louisa is not well acquainted with the poor people, and is very easily taken in to boot. It was you yourself who told us of her letting the Murrills have the tea-

leaves and broken meat from Brasbœuf. The Murrils! and he with a pension, and she drawing quite a handsome income from her sewing machine and dressmaking. The Murrils ought to be ever so much above broken meat."

"And I am going to be ever so much above interfering, when I shall no longer be able to do any good, and I have no doubt I shall soon cease to be missed," said Phyllis carelessly,

"But you will not keep Ellen and me from doing our parts," pleaded Anne. "Surely, Ellen, you will never throw up your classes and your cottages. I am certain I shall not be able to hold up my head in church—sitting in so prominent a pew as we sit, too—if we are not to help the vicar any longer," ended Anne in a tearful voice.

"Perhaps you have held it up long enough; perhaps that is not the most becoming attitude in church," remarked Miss Phyllis with calm irony. "Let us try what it is like to be simple hearers of the gospel. But mind, I don't compel either of you to follow my example. I only advise you, Anne, not to go and make a muddle of everything, as you undoubtedly will by yourself. As for you, Ellen, if you like to go over and work under your aunt Cuthbert and her man, who, as a new broom, will most likely sweep our old system clean out of existence—whether he can find a new one to suit is quite another thing—I don't propose to prevent you."

"Aunt Phyllis," said Ellen with repressed fire, "I should never think of doing such a thing. It would be hypocrisy in me. I don't believe Uncle Cuthbert's wife knows a bit about such work. She has made the most glaring mistakes, and offered a premium to imposition and worthlessness, in every step she has taken of her own accord. I dare say her cousin is just such a vicar as she is a squire's wife. I don't care to have anything to do with incapables. I could not instruct them, and they would get me laughed at, along with themselves. I dare say Mr. Curtis will not try to keep the parish in the good working order in which he has found it. I predict he will be great in morning calls and lawn tennis—like the curates in novels and in pictures—in shooting and hunting, and dining with his neighbours."

"And why not, pray? inquired Miss Hatherley sharply. "Is he not bound to show the respect due to his equals and superiors? Has he no social obligations? Have the better classes not souls to be saved as well as the working people?"

"Yes, but the question is, are their souls to be saved by lawn tennis, at the sides of covers, and at dinner tables?" asked Miss Phyllis drily.

Ellen was not listening; she was saying to herself with scorn, "No doubt he, too, will have come among us with his *bons partis*, his intentions

to take us in, climb the social ladder, and enrich himself at our expense. Where shall we find an excellent match for him? Mr. Lomax has the largest estate in the neighbourhood, but then there are several girls as well as boys in the family. There is a millionaire contractor who is said to be coming to settle at Church Addington, and he has only two daughters—according to report, plain, purse-proud, and vulgar. But one of them might be found susceptible of polish, if she were only gilded sufficiently. She might not come amiss to the new vicar. Oh, how I hate scheming, greedy people! And if they are detestable anywhere, they are perfectly odious in the Church. What a misfortune that Uncle Cuthbert's wife had a cousin in orders!"

So all the Misses Hatherley—though Miss Anne was coerced much against her will—struck work at once in the parish, and suffered it to be understood that they were to retire on their laurels, and leave the vicar to find fresh assistants for his operations.

"I never thought the Hatherleys could be so spiteful, Sam," declared Mrs. Bellamy. "It is all Phyllis's doing, because the young clergyman is Louisa Hatherley's cousin; but I could not have believed it even of Phyllis. I can only hope Mr. Curtis will get on splendidly without the old women and the young one. I had intended to send him in to dinner with Ellen

the first time they were here—such a nice pair they might have made—but the Hatherleys are standing in their own light, and I shan't now. I shall give him to Katie Lomax, and I shall cram Mrs. Cuthbert with parish details as well as I can. I might have gone into the line myself to back her, only I have my own old man to look after, and Mrs. Tom and my grandchildren to see to. Such a shame to leave Louisa and the young vicar in the lurch! Miss Phyllis was as good as a parish clerk for precedents and particulars, and to tell on which side the wind of public opinion blew, and how much the farmers would stand. She was a great deal better than the present clerk, who is a ninny, and only got into the office, which he should not have had, last year. That was Phyllis Hatherley's doing again; I suspect she wished to have him under her thumb."

The village itself fell in a state of bewilderment, which showed symptoms of passing into anarchy. For thirty years the Misses Hatherley had acted, on the whole, with discrimination and energy, at their posts, as patronesses of the charities and discipline of the place. The late vicar had been diffident and supine, willing to let the natural influence of the old Park family prove paramount above all, after he had retreated so far as the Beeches. His sphere was the pulpit; he remitted the serving of tables largely to the Misses

Hatherley, with occasional help from Christopher, who sometimes found time to play in the cricket matches, in the field appropriated to the *gamins* of Courtfield, or to look in at the night school where a schoolmaster selected by Phyllis was painfully teaching the ideas of agricultural hobble-dehoyhood how to shoot.

The vicar had not been eloquent, though he meant well and did his best. The bucolic intellect was hard to reach by means of sermons. The serving of tables—the penny clubs and saving banks—the Dorcas societies and soup kitchens—the largesses of coals and flannels, physic and kitchen stuff—even the gay illuminated cards which delighted the Sunday-school children, came more home to Hodge, and went nearer to his heart.

The Misses Hatherley, notably Miss Phyllis, had become real powers of the church in Courtfield, and their support could not be withdrawn without serious danger to the time-honoured edifice.

“Dang it! if t’ould ladies are no longer to have a hand in everything, I dunno if so be I’ll go in for the young passon. It were Miss Phyllis got our lad his place, and Miss Anne cossetted up t’ould woman, and Miss Ellen drove over to Addington, her did, to save Perry Blayne’s lame leg, when he were down with it fair bad. He would have lost his chance of an allotment there, if his name had not been put down in time.

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If t'ould ladies are to have nowt more to do with the concern, which they have worked at ever sin' I can remember, but are to be shook off and shunted aside to make way for Squire Hatherley's madam, or any other new-fangled madam and her passon, I dunno see why I should keep by Church and State no longer."

The speaker who expressed himself as if Church and State had been greatly benefited by him in time past was an old day labourer of the thoughtless, improvident stamp. He had done nothing in the course of his history save receive as his undoubted due, every time the shoe pinched, either in his own person or the persons of his family, sundry perquisites and doles as a fit accompaniment to his going to church on a convenient Sunday afternoon. But if Amos Atkins could do nothing else, he could at least wag his tongue with such effect as to lead a large proportion even of his more industrious and careful neighbours by the nose.

"I dunno see why I shouldn't go along to meet'n where t'Methody chap houlds forth. He is like to be a more rousin' preacher, and he is cousin's son to my Betsy, just as passon is cousin to Squire Hatherley's lady;" and Amos thrust his tongue into his cheek at the apt parallel. "For I won't stand t'ould ladies bein' put down as has gone in and out among us this thirty or forty year, and are the right kidney, though Miss

Phyllis do be main bothersome and worritin' sometimes." Amos's sentiments were approved of and echoed, till the whole village was prepared—with a mixture of praiseworthy gratitude and the general refractoriness and invidious criticism of human nature—to stand aloof and give the coldest reception to the vicar.

Alaric Curtis was a new broom, and was minded to sweep clean; but he was also minded, quite as much as his cousin Louisa had been, to make himself liked, and to succeed in marshalling all the old forces under the present reign. He had too much intelligence, and had thought over the matter too thoroughly, not to measure correctly the benefit of gaining over the former authorities to the later government. He was quite aware that if he did not, he would fight the flesh, the world, and the devil, in his parish, at a disadvantage, in a losing battle for many a day.

Besides, he was a well-conditioned young fellow, and hated to have anything to do with cashiering subordinate officers who had been in the field long before him, and had proved faithful according to their lights. The vicar was not a positive marvel of ability and excellence, or altogether exempt from prejudice and crankiness on his own account; but he was as far above small jealousy of petticoat influence as he was beyond craven subserviency to it. He was simply a devout, upright, rather clever fellow, very much

in earnest about all he undertook. His career had been a good deal impeded and altered by delicate health. He had been consumptive as a lad, and so had been compelled to submit to many restrictions, and to accept many indulgences, highly distasteful to manly youth. And Alaric Curtis was manly, even healthy-minded, which is rarer with a physique like his. He was at times furiously anxious to get on, to show signs of prospering in his work, to do something while his day lasted; and at intervals he was beset with anticipations of the early death which he had been forced to face, and had escaped in his teens. There was no good reason for such anticipations. He had outlived and outgrown his constitutional weakness so far as it threatened life. As a young man of eight-and-twenty he was still "slimmer" in his tall figure than he might have been, the colour in his thinnish face inclined to hectic, he was not particularly long-winded or swift-footed. Indeed, he was confessedly asthmatic like William of Orange, and liable, after the fashion of Mr. Bellamy, to bouts of bronchitis now and then. Therefore, as a matter of necessity, he had to be careful about standing or sitting in wet boots, and dispensing with an overcoat at night or in winter. All these hindrances and mortifications to a young man he bore courageously and cheerfully; and perhaps there was at least as much manliness in acknowledging and respecting his

natural limits as in defying them. None could say, after all, that the Reverend Alaric was either a molly-coddle or a valetudinarian. He had never been known to shirk a duty which he could discharge, because of discomfort and damage to himself. As a rule he contrived to forget, except in the precautions—call them “training”—incumbent upon him, his not very robust health and occasional sharp ailments, and so gave his physique the best chance it could get. He suffered in silence, which grew to be half unconscious, a certain amount of bodily infirmity, and thought and acted for the most part as if he were as strong as his neighbours.

Few young men were more full of life and spirit in the higher sense than the new vicar, except when he had his low fits. And then he was not so much low as solemn—intent with a nervous concentration of purpose which, it must be confessed, was liable to become irritable and exacting, in the prospect of a career ended before any work worth chronicling for his Master had been well begun. Yet even this hard destiny Alaric Curtis could have faced, when it came to the worst, with something of Christian heroism. It was because it had not and would not come to the worst, and he was only yielding to constitutional defects and conjuring up spectres, that his nerves became worn and his temper galled.

Alaric Curtis was mostly to be seen in clerical

costume; for he said it was a bad sign of modern times that a man had become ashamed of his uniform. When it came to that, Alaric was not exactly fit for a fox-hunter's pink, or a sportsman's knickerbockers; yet he took kindly to them sometimes, got a mount or went out with a gun, when he rather astonished his comrades for the moment by his zeal and prowess against heavyish odds than scandalised them by his incapacity.

The tall slight figure and the keen flushed face, under the broad hat, were soon familiar objects in the village, though they continued to provoke much hostile criticism which they did not deserve, and were looked at with obstinate dissatisfaction. He sought to recommend himself by every honourable method in his power, and was not going to feel disheartened and discomfited because he did not meet with immediate favour. But he experienced a little damping astonishment and regret at the discovery that a remote country village, with its comparative innocence and docility—which, to be sure, he knew very well were often only ignorance—could not trust a man when it saw him, but must look the gift horse—the new parson—not merely in the mouth, but all over, and keep aloof from him, till he stood some test unknown to him.

Alaric soon observed that in the conversations which his humble parishioners could not well

refuse to hold with him, with whatever cautious distance and dryness the talk was maintained, the name of the Hatherleys—not his cousin and her husband, but the Hatherleys long settled in the neighbourhood—constantly, even obtrusively, and as if by design, cropped up with a strain of reproach and asperity in the pertinacious allusions. He speedily began to connect his own difficulty with the people with this dogged allegiance, and strove to show indirectly that the two forces need not be in opposition. For why should they? He was interested and amused by all he heard and saw, when he called at the Cottage. He desired nothing better than that these Misses Hatherley, old and young, should be on his side—owning him their vicar, as no doubt they must do, being faithful Churchwomen. Certainly he was aware they did not hit it off with his cousin Louisa, though the two families were nominally on good terms, and visited formally. He was slightly surprised again at this not hitting it off, for his little cousin was the most pacific and good-natured of women. But he supposed that relations-in-law were always tempted to disagree, and in order to counteract this peculiar temptation, he felt inclined to propose—Oh! the short-sighted vanity of man—that he should form a bond of union, and not a bone of contention, between the factions.

Of course the Hatherleys at the Cottage baffled every attempt which the vicar made at establish-

ing a friendly footing ; and of course, the more he was baffled, the more he grew piqued, being an ardent persevering young fellow, into greater interest in his antagonists.

From the first he had found the Cottage more attractive than Brasbœuf. This was slightly ungrateful in him, since Louisa had lavished kindness and petting on her kinsman, had detained him in her house as long as she could, and when he would stay no longer, had devoted days and weeks, in company with Mrs. Bellamy, to making comfortable for him the old vicarage, which he insisted was quite habitable. Cuthbert had also been friendly in his cool manner, which nobody, save his wife, seemed to understand, or could put pressure on, so as to spur it into something like cordiality.

Still the Cottage afforded a far more alluring and exciting field for Alaric's speculations. By taking up his residence in the quaint old vicarage he was not only at the church door, he was at the enemy's gates. For he had been forced to see that the family at the Cottage were, for some reason, collectively his enemy. He was still bent, as became his character and cloth, on changing the foes into friends ; but he had come to recognise that it would not be so easy a matter as he had at first, in his simplicity, imagined it to be. He was already a wiser, if a sadder man.

Alaric Curtis listened with roused attention to

all the tales he heard of Miss Phyllis, and concluded that she must be a woman of erratic genius, considerable strength of character, and much Christian benevolence, worth studying—not to say winning for an ally. But he was fascinated by the glimpses he caught of Ellen, though she had also struck work, behaved in a contumacious fashion, and did all she could to circumvent her parson.

The Misses Hatherley, like other workers on strike, paid the penalty by a personal starvation from daily and hourly gossiping occupations, and by being compelled to witness, without the opportunity of admonishing and relieving them, the misdeeds and sufferings of the ladies' adopted children. Sometimes the penalty proved too much for Miss Phyllis—stout-hearted woman as she was in any determination she adopted. She would break the rule of non-interference, by rushing to the correction or succour of some erring young or sick old person. Then, when the young vicar appeared, according to his right, on the scene, and sought to launch forth into thanks and praise, she would withdraw in a deeper huff than ever, and refuse to have anything more to do with the case.

Ellen followed suit with the utmost precision. She had been accustomed to play the organ in church, and when she had resigned the unsalaried post, the unoffending organ, in default of any

better course, was handed over, with a salary furnished by the vicar, to the daughter of one of the neighbouring farmers, who had been trained to be a teacher and had learned something of music in a normal school. But the performance was so little creditable to popular education, and so grated on the ears and tingled in the fingers of the former organist, that she could not resist stealing into the church, on week evenings, to coach Miss Fairlie in her practising. When Alaric—strolling in from the ivy-covered, lattice-windowed vicarage next door—surprised Ellen at the lessons, she fled like a deer, and, also like a deer when it has taken sanctuary, looked back at him, from the cottage gate, with a haughty head and inflated nostrils.

Once Alaric Curtis came on Ellen Hatherley carrying home, in her arms, a little child which had strayed, in the winter sunshine, beyond the village, and fallen asleep, like a dormouse, after it had crept close to a leafless hedge. He begged to relieve her of her burden, but she declined his offer curtly, and walked away with a steady quick pace, and an unswerving poise of her figure.

The refusal of his aid cut him in two ways. "What a wretched apology for a man she must think me, she who is the picture of health, and looks as if she could run a race with Atalanta, or save a child by its dress clutched between her teeth, while she hung on by the hot stern chains,

like the woman in the burning ship "Amazon," he reflected almost bitterly. "Well, it is no good to be jealous of a woman, is it?" He pulled himself up. "But how that girl—who looks as if she could be candid, generous, and true as steel to her friends—suspects and detests me! What on earth can I, or a harmless friendly soul like my cousin Louisa, have done, to call forth such lively contempt and rancorous dislike?"

It was not an agreeable puzzle; and it tormented the poor vicar all the more, because under his brave fight with his own disqualifications, he entertained an ardent, magnanimous admiration of what, he felt convinced, was the wealth of courage and constancy—the moral attributes which he was pleased to think reflected their physical counterparts of strength and stability in Ellen Hatherley.

The Reverend Alaric sighed and pined under his practical ostracism from the one house in his parish which he had a selfish passion to conquer.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INCENSED PEACE-MAKER.

CHRISTOPHER was perfectly well disposed towards his vicar, and the two men liked the little they saw of each other. But their engagements took them in different directions, and afforded them little leisure to become better acquainted.

In the course of a conversation which he happened to hold with his sister-in-law on one cheerless winter afternoon, Christopher heard more about Alaric Curtis, and had his eyes more widely opened to his family's relations with the new-comer and to their tendency, than Christopher had managed to discover in half-a-dozen evenings' intercourse, in general society, with the vicar.

Christopher had wished to see Cuthbert on some piece of family business, and had taken Brasbœuf on his way home from Birmingham. The master of the house was out, but its mistress was ready to welcome the brother, and press him to wait for Cuthbert's return. It would be a

piece of charity to her to give her his company for an hour on this dull afternoon, Louisa said.

It was a stock phrase, but it shocked Christopher to see that she looked the sense of the words. He shook himself wide awake, to take accurate stock of the appearance and surroundings of his old acquaintance, who had become his near kinswoman. Then it went to his heart to find, when his eyes were clear of his own dreams and fully directed to the subject, how much the little woman had lost in sprightliness, even in serenity, since her last summer's visit to the Park. He felt guilty of the falling off, as if he had been Louisa's keeper. It seemed to him that he must answer to Caroline Fox for the change; and he remembered ruefully how fond the sisters, who were so unlike, had always been of each other.

What could be the reason of the alteration, which made Louisa look to-day like a poor forlorn, snubbed, if not crushed, little creature? She must have been crying in her loneliness over her sense of failure in her big, pleasant drawing-room by the glowing fire, which had struck him, at the first glance, as so home-like and cheerful when he came in from the wet and darkness of the outer world.

Could Cuthbert treat his wife with less consideration than she was entitled to receive from him? their brother asked in dismay. But the

couple had always appeared on the best terms—indeed, were puzzlingly confidential, for old Cuddie had unquestionably opened out to his wife. At this very moment she was answering unhesitatingly for his speedy return, and for his being ready and pleased to receive his brother. What, then, could cause the growing wanness and haggardness which, as Christopher took a long look at her covertly, had already stolen a good deal away from her comely soft bloom? Above all, what sent that involuntary quaver into the old blithe voice when she told him that it would be a piece of charity to her to give her an hour of his company? The Louisa Fox whom he used to know, become so dispirited and nervous as to be fain to claim passing sympathy, was a grievous puzzle to Christopher; and he set himself, with an instinct of championship which made him feel a strong inclination to be very angry with somebody, to find out and remedy the wrong. No doubt he would soon learn all about it, listening to her prattle in the freedom of her own fireside.

But the grounds for Louisa Hatherley's looking ill and sorrowful, which was so strange a thing for her, as to startle an old friend, were too complex and complicated for Christopher or any man to master them in an hour's time.

The little woman had got out of health. She was missing her sister sorely, though, with her

own share of pride and unselfishness, she would not summon Lina to pay a visit at an unpropitious time. It was mid-winter; the weather was dismal; visitors could not be coaxed abroad; and Louisa had not attained Mrs. Bellamy's good fortune in commanding a family party in the house. It was this last consciousness which rankled most painfully in Louisa's mind on the dreary January day. If Ellen would but have come to her, and been at home, as she ought to have been, in the uncle's house over which she had once presided! Ellen running out and in, playing bars on the piano, singing snatches of songs, would have made all the difference in the world. She would have brought the spring of gaiety about the place, which only the presence of young people, however perverse and possessed with their own small troubles, can produce. And for the first time Louisa felt herself no longer young in spirit, but beginning to get old and languid and depressed, failing in mind and body—prematurely infirm, indeed. Apart from Ellen, if only Phyllis and Anne would have consented to be available, Louisa would not have asked such a concession from Sophy. Phyllis and Anne were still active and able to go about and visit, and they were Cuthbert's own sisters, who ought to take an interest in Brasbœuf, and care for what was going on there. And Phyllis was so clever and energetic, she would have

found a thousand things to suggest and improve upon; and Anne, Mrs. Bellamy said, was always obliging and ready to laugh or do anything to fill up a pause in social intercourse. So far from minding Phyllis's dauntless interference, or finding Anne's big body and complacent inert mind in the way, Louisa would have been delighted and grateful for the boon implied in the possession of such valuable aids against straits of weariness, home-sickness, and despondency. And she would have given as good as she would have taken; she desired nothing better than to be allowed to be helpful, and to brighten life at the Cottage. She had, without avail, tried every device she could think of to reconcile her sisters-in-law and her niece-by-marriage to her.

But the world would not know that Louisa Hatherley had striven to make peace. The world would misjudge and condemn her, as the interloper, the source of strife. This was another thorn in Louisa's smarting flesh. There was only one step more to the piteous conclusion—argued with the inconsequence and disregard for probabilities of a simple woman—that the mighty public, which had so much weightier business to do, would paint her, Louisa, as a dragon of domineering arrogance, selfishness, and unkindness. It was hard to be so unfairly stamped, and handed round to contemporaries,

possibly passed down to posterity, if posterity troubled its head about her.

Lastly, Louisa's cousin Alaric was under the ban as well as herself. It had been by her means, if not exactly through her fault, that he was called on to suffer with her. He was taking it desperately to heart. Very likely it was his continued unpopularity and the absence of any sign of dawning good-will in the village, quite as much as the late storms, which had brought on his recent attack of bronchitis. He might die of it yet. She knew he had anticipated the worst. He had said to her suddenly one morning, "Louisa, if anything should happen, you will know what to do about writing to my people. I could wish I had been spared to make more mark here; I trust not altogether from unworthy motives and paltry, personal ambition. But, of course, it will be all right. Some new-comer will fill my shoes far better than I have filled them, and may have more tact to avoid arousing the antagonism which I have unluckily provoked." Alaric was a great deal better since then; he had even laughed at his lugubrious directions the last time she had seen him. But the winter was not over, and very probably he would die yet, and she would have been the cause of the death of her cousin Alaric, whom she had always respected and loved like an elder sister, for had he not been like a young brother to her and

Lina? Only a few months ago she had been very proud of getting him a living, and she had been sure he would prove a blessing to Court-field. She had been persuaded that, after a little while, Phyllis and Ellen would like him very much, and be pleased to have a young vicar as thorough-going as themselves. But it had been a mistake all round.

It was only about the last mistake that Christopher was told. Louisa poured forth her story, between crying and laughing, as her spirits rose a little with having so attentive and impressed a listener. For Cuthbert was so strong, and had been so prosperous himself, that he always thought nobody should care for any annoying obstacles, but bear them down by sheer opposition force. Louisa told Christopher that the villagers, though they went to church and heard Alaric's excellent sermons, would not attend his classes. The night-school had fallen off by more than one-half, though he went and taught in it himself, at the risk of his life, she protested. He had tried to get up a course of lectures on mechanics, with illustrations, which he thought would interest and benefit the young men of the parish; but he had to lecture to bare walls—animated chiefly by the presence of herself and Mrs. Bellamy, when she could get away from her husband and young people. Not half-a-dozen straggling members of the audience for which

the lectures had been prepared put in an appearance.

Alaric had wished to set on foot a comprehensive store to save the women the fatigue and expense—for he declared their time was their money—of walking all the way to Addington for most of their grocery and drapery goods; and he had proposed to open a coffee and reading room; but nobody in the working class would second him.

The doors of the cottages were not quite shut against him; the resistance was passive; but he was barely asked to sit down even by a sick bed.

Yes, indeed, it was too true; and all the want of cordiality and co-operation was occasioned by the village folks having taken it into their stupid heads that poor Al, who was entirely innocent, had given some ground of deadly offence at the Cottage. And they got this notion because the Misses Hatherley would not take up his side of the question; on the contrary, they refused, as far as they could, to acknowledge him and his office.

If Christopher would but get Phyllis and Anne and Ellen to visit her, Louisa's, sins on her own head; if he could induce his sisters and niece not to transfer her wrong-doing to the account of a guiltless young fellow whose usefulness they were impairing, and whose heart they were breaking!

This was a highly coloured view of the case; but Louisa believed it implicitly for the moment,

when she said it finally with a flood of tears to Christopher, and besought him to exert his influence and procure redress, before Alaric Curtis was done to death by what amounted to persecution. He did not need her to fight his battles; he would show everybody what he was, if he lived—if he lived; but he had never been strong, and should he die, surely Christopher's sisters and Ellen would be sorry. Louisa could not believe that they knew what they were doing. If they were told, might they not repent in time?

Louisa relieved her aggrieved, alarmed feelings, and sent Christopher home in a towering passion, which, though she was at the bottom of it, would have frightened her more than it did any of the delinquents. Christopher did not bottle up his wrath; he flung it about prodigally at the Cottage tea-table. He had been long-suffering in enduring his sisters' low opinion of his deserts, and of what he had sacrificed and done for the family. But he had never paused in speaking his mind, when he was stirred up to find fault with any domestic doings. He might be a lamb-like lion, for the most part, in his household, but whoever imagined Christopher Hatherley henpecked, made a huge mistake.

"I cannot compass the extremes which meet in you women," he began so seriously and even solemnly, that Ellen came to his elbow in amazement, Phyllis stopped short in the nightcap she

was knitting with all her might, Anne sat up in her chair, even Sophy looked round. "You can be ministering angels, and you can be as relentless and pitiless, on the slightest provocation, as the worst of men to his worst enemy."

"What have we been doing now?" inquired Phyllis, raising her eyebrows, not without an anticipation of "stern joy" in the tug of war.

"What have you not been doing?" cried Christopher furiously. "What harm has Louisa Fox, your brother's wife, ever done you, that you should use her like—like a pickpocket; that you can take it upon you to punish her imaginary offences in the most cowardly and cruel manner possible, in the person of her cousin who is your parish clergyman, against whom, from anything you have seen of the young man himself, you have not a word to say?"

"Oh! is it only that she, or was it he, has been complaining to you?" asked Phyllis in a tone of studied moderation which was peculiarly exasperating. "I am not astonished; that is just what I should have expected from them."

"It is utterly false with regard to him," rampaged Christopher; "and as for her, I suppose you call it a sneaking thing in her to speak to me—on her cousin's behalf, mind, not on her own—I do not believe she has even breathed a word of complaint for herself to her husband. I do not know whether sneaking is considered as

unwomanly as it is held unmanly, but I put it to you, Phyllis, and you, Ellen, and the rest of you, whether it is like women—gentlewomen—Christian gentlewomen as I presume you profess to be, to make up your minds to turn your backs on another woman, whose sole crime is that she has come among you and made Cuthbert happy.”

“Christopher,” Sophy interrupted him with her usual frigid, elaborately grammatical propriety, “you forget to whom you are speaking. Besides, it is not true that we have used Mrs. Cuthbert like a pickpocket. What an expression to come out of a gentleman’s mouth!”

Christopher was on the point of maintaining that it was a capital expression, the best for what he meant to convey, when Phyllis capped it with a still more questionable expression from a lady’s mouth. In fact, it was so questionable, that though Phyllis was sufficiently advanced in life to have met in her youth some of the contemporaries of the Misses Berry in their old age, and heard their strongly garnished conversation, she was horrified at herself, the moment the objectionable word crossed her indignant lips, and caught her shocked ears. She was forced to balance the undue force of her adjective by a ludicrously weak noun. “It is an infernal” Phyllis had burst in passionately, then scared, on the instant, by the diabolical sound of the epithet she had

used, she paused a second, cast a hasty glance of deprecation round her audience, and with a convicted falter in her voice, stammered out, on the spur of the moment, the mild substantive "fib."

But Sophy was already holding up her white, withered, mittened hands with a groan, signifying, "What are we all coming to?"

Anne laughed, of course too late. Christopher was still too far beside himself to laugh.

Only Ellen, with the unfailing sense of the absurd, which is generally the first perception to seize on the youthful mind, tittered, barely suppressing an hysterical giggle. It was her turn to put in her oar. "Uncle Chris," she said with a shade of severe admonition in her respectful, distressed tone, "I am sorry that you should be so much put out. But are you quite sure you know all"—she corrected herself, for already she had caught a warning sign from Phyllis—"that you understand everything about these people—Mrs. Cuthbert and her cousin? Can you not make some allowance for what may be our different experience of them? You know men and women's experiences are always distinct and apart."

Christopher faced round upon her, "You are as bad as the others, Ellen—a baby to pretend to teach me, your father's brother," he said; nevertheless there were tokens of relenting in his voice. "Girl, I knew the Foxes when you were

running about in red shoes with top-knots on your shoulders. As for the vicar, are you aware the young fellow is working himself to death, goaded on by you women's sneers?"

"The more fool he," said Phyllis stoutly, hurrying to speak, in order to drown Anne's frightened exclamation, "Oh Phyllis! There, I knew you were in the wrong." "He will not die in that way," declared Phyllis reassuringly.

"I hope not," said Christopher more calmly, "I sincerely hope not, for I believe he is a very good fellow, though he is so thin-skinned as to take to heart your slights and cuts, and the disgraceful way in which the villagers are following them up. But I will soon show Mr. Amos Atkins and Mrs. Wiggins, and a few more of these worthies, what I think—both of the new vicar and their reception of him. However, there is a chance that I may not be in time, in which case it will be a nice reflection for you women, that you have succeeded in polishing off your own vicar."

Now Miss Anne got in her word first. "Christopher, it has not been my fault," she cried, gulping down a sob of dismay.

"I abhor slang," said Miss Hatherley tersely and testily.

"I am not frightened," proclaimed Phyllis impenitently.

But Ellen *was* frightened. Though her spirit was as high, her heart was not so tough in its refractoriness. She had seen more of Alaric Curtis than her aunts had seen, though she had done her best to keep out of his way. She recollected with trepidation the occasional cough, which in her hard-hearted young strength she had called scornfully "an old woman's cough," or a piece of affectation to make him seem delicate and interesting; the changing colour like a girl's, which she had described in ironical phrase as "a complexion of lilies and roses, really too beautiful for a man;" the recurring languor, shaken off with an effort, which had rendered her sure he was a puppy and coxcomb in disguise. Other symptoms which had nothing to do with Alaric Curtis's state of health intruded themselves somehow, and swelled the tide of Ellen's self-accusation and unhappiness. Wistful glances and reproachful tones, which had hitherto only served to thrill her with fresh anger, all at once began to smite her with aggravated remorse, until she was more conscience-stricken and wretched than Louisa Hatherley, in her good-nature, would have liked to know.

But Ellen could not very well come forward and recant publicly. For that matter, none of the Misses Hatherley could easily change the worse than neutral attitude the family had assumed towards the vicar, even if Phyllis would

have let them. The deed was done, and could not be soon, if ever, undone ; so that, after all, Christopher's rude attack on his womankind was likely to be as unavailing as were most of his enterprises.

CHAPTER XVII.

FRATERNISATION OVER DEFEAT.

SPRING had come again with the first prim-rose, which was still a surprise and delight to the middle-aged man Christopher Hatherley, and with it the artist's trying times and hard-won triumphs of sent-in pictures, hanging committees, show-days, and exhibitions.

Christopher had made up his mind to compete again this year. He had finished his "Fugitives"—those fugitives who might have been early Christians, or Albigenses, or barbarians.

He encountered the ordeal of packing and forwarding his picture, in the light of all the former disappointing ventures, since the remote time when some of his early work had been accepted, as that of a clever art student. He had nothing more to do than to wait in suspense, like a lad who has never tried to exhibit before—only the lad is usually buoyed up by modest confidence, however misplaced, and supported by ignorant encouragement and bold predictions of victory on the part of his friends. But the man's confidence, audacious or

otherwise, had long been exhausted, and his friends had shaken their heads over his failure till the heads were tired, and the individuals owning them were inclined to feel more and more provoked at the pig-headed obstinacy of an old fellow who would not take a telling, but was still so green as to claim the consolation that his daubs had been unappreciated by his generation.

The last trial of simply waiting proved too much for Christopher. He grew so restless that not only his family, but the man himself, was forced to see that he needed a holiday. He took a fortnight's run into Wales, armed with his sketch-book, though the sun was a long way yet from waxing powerful enough to warrant a white umbrella.

It was during Christopher's absence that his fate was sealed by unmistakable indications, only too well known to the household at the Cottage. First came the official-looking letter, which to be sure might have contained the magic word "Accepted," but following close on its heels, announcing a contrary verdict, arrived the oblong box. Ellen began to think it looked like a coffin. It had been constructed long ago by the village carpenter, under the young man Christopher Hatherley's directions, and had gone on many such fruitless errands to and from London. There were none even of the meaner glories of attainment for Christopher—no proud rush to London,

no busy varnishing day, no resort, according to immemorial custom, in the company of a crowd of young artists, with himself the veteran, the youngest-hearted and jolliest of them all, to a well-known rallying ground, to break the shock of their appearance before the public.

"Christopher's luck," said Miss Phyllis, not so much sadly as sternly, "as steady as the Queen's weather, because he cannot see and turn from the error of his ways, and paint pictures as other people paint them. I am sorry for him, but he has himself to blame, or rather he is incapable of amendment. I never expected anything else. I wonder he could humble himself and us afresh, by trying again at the Academy."

"Oh! Aunt Phyllis, how can you say so?" cried Ellen desperately. "You know there are the most beautiful things in his pictures, and he would be nothing if he were not original. I believe it is only stupid pedantic blindness which continues to set aside his work, for some learned example of dexterity which might have been produced by machinery, for any sign of a soul in it."

"Poor Chris!" said Anne Hatherley with the same comfortable, quickly forgotten pity which she had expressed a hundred times before.

"Christopher had no need to choose such a profession," reflected Sophy. "I remember how vexed my father was. He would have had Chris-

topher enter the Church, when he might have been our vicar at this moment."

"It was only Ellen who felt, in her sympathy, as if a dark cloud had come over the spring sunshine, and a chill wind commenced to blow, so that all the polyanthuses and jonquils, tulips and hyacinths, in the garden shrank and shivered. She had the box carried up to Christopher's studio; and thinking to save him pain, she had it opened, and the picture taken out, and set against the wall among the others, so as not to catch the painter's eye the first thing on entering the room.

She went and stood before the unfortunate "Fugitives," and remembered all the long hours which Christopher had ungrudgingly bestowed on his task, when he was never too weary, or wet, or out of the vein to labour at it; never proudly boasting, as a successful man might have boasted, that he only gave it the cream of his powers, so that it ought to show the full flow of inspiration at its best. For Christopher, if he had not worked like a hack and drudge, without waiting to consult humours and moods, could not have worked at all. The question was—whether genius could toil like a noble, patient servant, or whether she was only a selfish, fickle retainer, requiring to be coaxed into a reluctant display of her mettle.

Ellen recalled the subdued, yet still staunch and undying, hope with which Christopher had

sent forth his last child into the world, to have it sent back, as unfit for recognition among the other children of its race. She, too, had hoped, doubtfully yet brightly, and dared to pray that God would bless and prosper the work of his loyal, reverent servant's hands.

Being alone, with all these associations pressing upon her, Ellen sat down in the sitter's chair, in which she had spent many a happy hour, and cried bitterly. She was so engrossed with her melancholy occupation that she did not hear a step upon the stairs till the attic door was opened, and, to her unbounded affront and vexation, the vicar walked into the room, or rather crossed the threshold and stood still, in perplexity and pain, at her distress.

Christopher had fulfilled his threat, so far, of cultivating a personal friendship with Alaric Curtis, calling upon him in his study and inviting him to the elder man's workshop; and a *protégée* of Miss Phyllis's, more than ordinarily thick-headed, in her capacity of housemaid, had shown up the young man to the studio, without waiting to impart the important information that its master was from home.

"Miss Ellen," said the disturbed visitor—for even with him Ellen had to submit to the comparative familiarity of being "Miss Ellen," in order that the necessary distinction might be drawn between her and her aunts—"I am very

sorry. Has anything happened? Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, thanks," said Ellen a little hoarsely as well as huffily, while she strove, by one furious rub with her handkerchief, to dry her wet cheeks and eyelashes. Then the mortifying comicality of the situation, with all the erroneous grounds for it, which Mr. Curtis might imagine, constrained her to be frank. "I assure you not one of my aunts has been scolding me," she said, with a considerable infusion of petulance in her liveliness, as she met his eyes and tried to laugh. "Neither have I lost a pet dog or bird. If I had suffered a more serious loss, you know, you must have heard of it. Don't waste your pity under a false impression. It is only that Uncle Christopher's picture has failed to find a place in the Academy, and I am bemoaning the failure, like a goose. For, of course, I have been told, over and over again, that there are far more pictures sent in than the committee can find space for. Besides, men's judgments and tastes differ, and I should hope there are other art tribunals to appeal to, in other generations if not in our own, than the present hanging committee of the Royal Academy," Ellen finished with suspicious hauteur and frigidity.

"Certainly," chimed in Alaric eagerly, seizing on the small encouragement of this compulsory confidence, advancing into the room, and shaking

hands with her. "Besides, I have often heard there is the most miserable clutching at privileges in the critics' self-interest, the grossest practice of favouritism on the one hand, and betrayal of prejudice on the other, by these gentlemen." Alaric immediately launched into the wildest treason against the Royal Academicians. We are fain to trust, should it ever meet the august eyes, or reach the revered ears, of the important and honourable body, the members will graciously forgive the slander, on account of the temptation.

"I can't tell," said Ellen, still with determined moderation and dignity, feeling that it was beneath Christopher's merits and wrongs for her to rail on his behalf. "My uncle never says so. He thinks it is a difficult, thankless office which these gentlemen undertake; and no one can be more fully aware than he is of the faults which mar his work."

"If the committee only pronounce favourably on faultless work," said Alaric with decision, "I rather wonder that, instead of having no space at their disposal, they and the public are not left with bare walls at Burlington House, as the result of the ill-repaid task. Will you do me the favour of allowing me to look at Mr. Christopher's work, which he promised to show me?"

Ellen had no option. The only doubt she felt was whether she should leave him alone to his

survey, or summon one of her aunts. But neither of these steps recommended itself to her good sense and breeding. The first would scarcely be civil, and Ellen could not be rude to a visitor, were he the new vicar, at the Cottage. The second would look silly, as if she were school-girlish enough to become bashful and self-conscious, because she was going to be left alone with a young man for ten minutes. She had not been mistress of Brasbœuf for a short time without some gain in self-command, ease, and a comfortable familiarity with the usages of society. She contented herself with saying, "I shall be glad, if you wish it; and when you have finished, we can go down to my aunts, who will be pleased to see you."

Alaric Curtis went straight, as if by instinct, and stood before the "Fugitives."

This was the turning-point of his relations with Ellen Hatherley. She remained standing a little way off, where she had risen from her chair on his entrance, and looked at him with curiosity, and more than a shade of suspicion in her brown eyes, slightly compressed lips, and the very turn of her head. If he had floundered into incoherent extravagant praise, as insincere as it was undistinguishing, or if he had thought to make a display of his technical knowledge and critical acumen by the airs and manœuvres of a connoisseur, she would have set him down at once as deceitful, foolish, or insufferably conceited. She

would have been tempted to scorn him ever afterwards, in spite of the intermittent twinges of remorse for her share in the Misses Hatherleys' treatment of their vicar which had visited her lately.

But when Alaric continued quite still and silent, with only an earnest slightly puzzled expression on his face, gazing at the picture, Ellen knew that he was a true man, doing his best to catch the painter's meaning, and to form a correct opinion of his achievement. And her mind and heart wandered away to other considerations, which had nothing to do with art or Christopher, but which she could not help entertaining, and which affected her, though she tried to put them from her, telling herself they were no business of hers. Was the vicar a still sparer man than when he had first come to the parish? Had he always these little hollows in his cheeks? Did his colour have that vivid red in it from the first? Ellen's thoughts took a still further excursion. Like her aunt Phyllis at her age, Ellen, when her temper was not galled, had a passionate craving to relieve the physical suffering which the girl, in the bloom of health and strength, had never known. She had not yet thought of becoming a hospital nurse, but she was in a fair way to be, by the time she was forty, that amateur doctor which is a middle-aged woman's sole alternative from proving a fool—as if the two attributes did not

often meet in the same person! Ellen's speculations wandered off to Phyllis's last nostrums of milk and iron. Her imagination even travelled so far as a certain bin of choice old Madeira belonging to Mr. Bellamy. Mrs. Bellamy had said she had always bottles of it out, and insisted on delicate people drinking it regularly, when they were under her charge. Surely she would regard her vicar as under her charge, and dispense it to him liberally, both in her own house and in the form of Christmas and Easter presents to the Vicarage.

Alaric turned round and spoke, startling Ellen in her benevolent meditations on his account. "I do not pretend to be a judge of painting," he said. "I must say there are many things there I don't understand, and I think, so far as my own observation entitles me to speak, that Mr. Christopher is wrong in the way he has treated these figures to the right—but these are small objections. There are grand things in that picture. Unless the coming exhibition is to be a marvel of its kind, I am astonished to hear that any committee of artists should refuse that admission to their rooms."

"Are you not?" cried Ellen warmly, thrown off her guard, stepping quickly to his side, and looking at the picture with loving indignant eyes. "Is it not a great shame, a perfect disgrace? Don't you see the grand things? You have told

me that you do. I am so glad that one more person, in addition to his few admirers, can comprehend that Uncle Chris in his shabby coat, with his grey hairs and his drawing-lessons, is a true painter, like the great old masters."

"I am sure of it," said Alaric fervently, both in the sincerity of his conviction, and because he was carried clean off his feet, and thrown into a state of paradisiacal enchantment by her eager appeal. But he showed, the next moment, that whether he were on or off his feet, he viewed truth as a cardinal virtue, not to be wilfully tampered with, by deliberately qualifying his confirmation of her words. "I do not know about a shame and disgrace," he immediately added with a half-smile. "So many men at every stage and in every phase of the world's history have only been blind for a time, or simply dull with natural lack of wide or deep penetration, till the truth has stolen or burst upon them, beyond mistake or denial, enlightening their eyes first to merits which in the end the whole community acknowledges and delights to honour. But I am clear of this, that your uncle's work has some of these merits. What devouring anguish there is in some of these faces! What desolation in the crouching figure of the man in rags; what steadfast endurance and exhaustless faith in the attitude of the woman clutching his arm, to drag him up and on!"

Ellen was more than appeased. She was in a flutter of gratified grateful pride and pleasure. "Would you like to see the rest of the pictures? You ought to see the others," she urged. "I do not know if the good parts in all are so striking, but hardly one misses some effect which, after you have once discovered it, lays hold of you, and grows on you, so that you can never forget it. It will rise before you when you wake in the night, and you will not be able to fall asleep again, for wishing to puzzle out the mystery. There is always a mystery in Uncle Chris's best hits, as there is in nature. I found the last out, because his still pools and tossing branches of trees come before me at sight of the real pools and trees; and that has made me suspect there is the same secret in both of them."

The two went round the little collection, and Ellen, with her tongue loosed and her eyes shining, pointed out, with much intelligence, what she liked most; while he listened and suggested, and sometimes forgot—how reproachful she would have been had she detected the omission—to gaze at the detail in the picture, because of the bright young face before him, in which the painter's meaning was striving also for utterance.

But Ellen herself got a little confused in her explanations when the couple's hands met as they shifted the pictures to catch the proper light, and

the thrill in his fingers sent an answering thrill through hers, though she shook off the confusion impatiently.

When the inspection was over, and the visit to her aunts which Ellen had proposed—and *that* was very much like other formal visits—had been paid, and Alaric Curtis was fairly gone, she experienced a species of reaction. She felt momentarily troubled and dissatisfied with herself. She feared that she had suffered herself to be led on by an impulse, and betrayed into indiscreet frankness—which she doubly deprecated, since she knew she was, under certain conditions, prone to such weakness. She wondered, with a dawning sense of shyness and shame, whether her aunts had noticed how many steps towards becoming better acquainted with each other the vicar and she had taken in their *tête-à-tête* examination of the contents of Christopher's studio. She wondered again what her aunt Phyllis would think. She questioned whether it would be possible or permissible for her to meet Mr. Curtis, the next time they encountered each other, as almost a stranger. She settled it would not do, since he had turned out a genuine partisan of Christopher's. She laughed at her old notion that the vicar would be given up to lawn tennis and dinner-parties. She agreed with herself that he could not help being Mrs. Cuthbert's cousin, and that the odious term *bon parti* had probably never passed his lips. At

least he was not particularly intimate with the Lomaxes, and since the millionaire contractor at Church Addington did not reside within the bounds of the parish, very likely the vicar had not so much as called on the man.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A DUFFER BY PREFERENCE."

EVEN Ellen half forgot Christopher's discomfiture in the fresh adherent he had gained, and in the excitement of the new turn which events had taken; but it was small compensation to Christopher when he came back from his holidays, and found that the battle had been lost again in his absence. He said little when the bare fact was announced to him, though there was no want of feeling in the few words spoken by his sisters. It was from a kind motive that Phyllis quickly changed the subject, while Anne was pouring out a glass of wine for her brother, and Sophy arrested Anne's hand by crying, "Not that home-made trash; let Chris have a glass of my port."

"Home-made trash!" exclaimed Anne in amazement and consternation. "Why, it is some of Phyllis's very best elder-berry, of which Chris is quite fond."

"So I am," assented Christopher stoutly. "I prefer it to the most expensive concoction of log-

wood and bad brandy. Thanks all the same, Sophy. What else has been going on since I went away?"

"So like poor Chris to take it like this!" his sisters remarked, shaking their heads, the moment his back was turned; "he was always easy-going ('lumpish' Phyllis called him in her own mind), which no doubt stood in the way of his improving and getting on in his profession. But it has ceased to signify much, now that we are all growing old and Cuthbert is at home—at least at Brasbœuf."

Only Ellen detected the light go out of Christopher's eyes and a pallor become visible through the brown of his cheek.

She let him go up to his studio by himself; but as soon as she could presume to follow him and seek piteously to cheer him, standing afar off as it were, and repeating the tale of the young vicar's unbiassed judgment, together with a fresh earnest assurance of her own unshaken faith in his powers, she went after Christopher.

"Come in," he answered readily enough to her hesitating tap, and when she entered she found him doing nothing more tragical than standing reading the newspaper, which he had brought crumpled up in his hand, though she saw that he had been to his picture, and had lifted it again to its place on the easel, at his elbow. He did not look round,

guessing who was his visitor; he spoke instead, calling Ellen to his side.

"Look here, Ellen," he said: "I wish you to read this about Newbould. You may as well sit down, for he has got a whole column to his honour, and that of his work, in the great newspaper which typical Englishmen swear by, and of which they think so much, that they class being mentioned in it as only second to a tablet in Westminster Abbey."

Ellen did as she was told, reserving her crumb of comfort till she had obeyed Christopher, who, in the meantime, walked restlessly up and down the room.

The newspaper column contained an elaborate description by a privileged critic, admitted to a private view of those pictures of Mr. Newbould's that were to grace the Academy which rejected Christopher's single piece of work. Not that Newbould was deigning to crowd the walls with his canvases, as he might have done, being one of the R.A.'s themselves. He was only vouchsafing to send two pictures, but these were such *chefs-d'œuvre* as the lovers of art in England, nay, throughout the world, had rarely been favoured to see. Though the panegyric was enthusiastic and dogmatic, not permitting a doubt that Newbould was the painter of his age—one of the great painters of every age—it was not written entirely in the style of the professional puffer and penny-

a-liner. It may be that the staff of editors of the great newspaper would not admit such contributors to those of their pages which were not given up to advertisements. The criticism was eloquent, masterly in its way, even incisive, though it was thoroughly one-sided. Ellen, inexperienced girl as she was, had a distinct perception of this, while her heart was sore for Christopher. So much praise as, had it not been in the best taste, would have sounded fulsome, such homage lavished on this other man, and not the poor compliment of acceptance among the ruck of painters and their pictures, granted to Christopher Hatherley and his patient genuine work! Was there such a great gulf between the two men? or was it that one-half of the world, as represented by the critic, was so possessed with the excellences of John Newbould, falling in as they did with its own spirit, that it went on to imagine a hundred super-subtle qualities and exquisite graces which did not exist? And did such admirers become so engrossed and charmed with their inventive discrimination, that they would not consent to see other gifts and attainments, but grew as blind as a prejudiced detective, in declining to find a clue to inspiration of an opposite description? As for the remaining half of the world, it was content to run, whether with the select few, or with the unreasoning, gaping many—in either case incapable of forming a judgment

of its own, and too wary and cunning to give in its adherence to what was not already stamped with the sign of competent approval, or branded with the trade brand of success either by the choice spirits or the masses.

"Have you finished?" cried Christopher impatiently. "Did you ever know a fellow so belauded and bespattered with admiration by his followers—and they are legion? Yet we two started evenly enough together, and at one time there was a word of praise for me, as well as for him."

Ellen hung her head. She did not know what to answer. She had never heard Christopher betray jealousy like this before.

"Give honour to whom honour is due," he continued bitterly. "Ay, but is so much honour due to the one, and none at all to the other?" A burning sense of injustice had taken hold of the man. Though it was only to his niece and *confidante* he protested against the verdict which had been pronounced, his spirit was stirred within him, else he could not have done it. He was forced to speak out in a manner foreign to him, for he was a modest man, and it was his own works he was defending, his own wrongs he was redressing. He was also a liberal-minded lover of his art, and he had often said, and was ready to say again, that, in a certain light, John Newbould was well-nigh an unapproachable painter.

“I know to within an inch what Newbould can do, better than anybody, better than he knows himself,” Christopher said now. “Have I not watched every step in his career—not always to my own benefit? His hand and his eyes obey his head. I have told you before, Ellen, he can say what he means. He draws capitally. He colours sometimes splendidly. But he can never mean more than is in him. He is only a half-hearted, half-souled man after all. Clever! Oh! clever enough to buy the world and sell it again. But he has lost all faith in humanity, if he ever had much of it, and his faith in God is only second-hand. It is not exactly his idea of good taste to be a free-thinker, or at least to bellow his free-thinking. He prefers to patronise his Maker. John Newbould is capable of that. Do you remember his modern Prodigal?—his modern Lovers? Very clever and true to a certain mean, low side of truth, but a villainous libel, a detestable falsehood whenever you have penetrated the base surface and reached even the tainted core of humanity. Only a cold-blooded, white-blooded man could paint such insolently narrow pictures—insulting to the man’s species, and still more to their Creator. Take John Newbould himself, and get at the half-heart of him, beneath all his self-engrossment, superciliousness, and pretended good-natured tolerance—which is, in fact, arrogant contempt for his kind—and you

will reach something answering to the reflection of the Divine image, something you will not dare to mock and sneer at, or to pat on the back. But you will not discover it in his pictures, because he has not found it out for himself, either in himself or in another, or having caught a glimpse of it, he has lost it long ago." Christopher turned abruptly to his own picture. "Ellen," he said, "even you may count me a besotted blockhead, infatuated with blind, childish self-conceit, because the wise men of the critics have spoken, and the world has listened and said amen to the oracles, as in duty bound. The two forces have combined to exalt John Newbould to the skies, and to toss my productions aside as not worth the reckoning. The critics' and the world's decisions have been reversed before now, when posterity has had time to step in—which I am not guilty of supposing will happen in my case. But I say Newbould could no more have painted that face, which made me shiver as it rose beneath the brush, or those eyes which bade me pray, or the message in that young child's fingers, or even that bit of sky far ahead, than I could have painted the rocks and leaves in his poorest landscape, or the flesh tints in his most indifferent portrait."

"I believe you, Uncle Christopher," said Ellen in a half-whisper.

"Now, child, I will only ask you to read this other bit of the paper. See, it is the speech of an

art-bitten bishop—another Leo X.—at a public dinner, where John Newbould was présent. It was not the Academy dinner, neither had it anything specially to do with art; but the good bishop, who is fond of airing his æsthetic tastes, took the opportunity to pay a ‘just tribute,’ as he called it, to a great modern English painter then among the company. Mind, the speaker is a good man, my dear, that is the gist of the matter—public-spirited, earnest, devout—a very different man in his office from Leo, since the English bishop has compelled respect for the crosier and pastoral staff, and won love for their wearer and bearer. Now listen to what he says and be edified. ‘I am delighted to do the little I can to discharge my large debt of gratitude to Mr. Newbould, not only for the immense gratification he has given to me as a humble lover of art—the way in which he has charmed my eyes and such knowledge and intelligence as I possess on the subject; but also—and this is an infinitely higher obligation—for the service he has rendered religion and virtue, by the time and labour he has given, with a true man’s sympathy, I do not hesitate to say, and with what glorious results I, and many round me, can testify, to things pertaining to the sacredness of our higher life, in all its holy aims and blessed hopes.’ Good heavens, Ellen! what does the man—the right reverend bishop—mean? Is he, too, so thoroughly blinded? Ought not some-

body to open his eyes, though the task would be an invidious one, since he cannot distinguish for himself that John Newbould's saints are made up of picturesque poses and unreal sentimentality? They could never have held water, or stood upright of themselves. They are the weakest of visionaries. Newbould himself has not the smallest faith in them, except as fanatics or fools. His life is no more influenced by such as they are, than it is by dancing dervishes. There is not a man, not a rational creature among them, and if the bishop is completely deceived on this point, how can he have studied John Newbould's other pictures and failed to see that the cynicism with which they are eaten through is worldly, sensual, and devilish?"

"It is very strange," said Ellen, half appalled at the world's—even the good world's—lack of all nobler morality in its estimate of art. Yet she was not so appalled as to prevent her being prompted, in her turn, to tempt Christopher.

"But, Uncle Chris," she said, hesitating and colouring involuntarily for shame at the words she was about to speak, "don't you think it is rather a pity that you should always paint over people's heads? I mean, that you should not descend nearer the level of ordinary people, in this generation at least? I have heard there are books too good for the public; may it not be so with pictures? Cannot you try a bad picture—no,

of course I don't mean that—an inferior picture, and see if you cannot beat Mr. Newbould on his own ground ?”

Christopher, who had begun to march up and down the room again, stood still and looked at her, confounded by her words. It was an amazed, reproachful, indignant look, which smote Ellen, for it seemed to say two terrible things—“Thou, too, Ellen !” and “Get thee behind me, Satan !” but with his lips Christopher made no such wondering, piteous, wrathful protest. On the contrary, he spoke more lightly than he had spoken throughout the conversation ; and presently he began to laugh and jest, though with an effort, in his usual manner.

“What ! you would have me deliberately perpetrate pot-boilers ; or, what would be worse, paint down to the supposed standard of the people's ability and feeling ; treat them to curates at afternoon tea, or babies having their toes toasted ? No, thanks ; I elect to remain a duffer. I tell you, Ellen, I am a duffer by preference ; and if I were false to my colours, the world would soon have its revenge, and I my punishment. I should sink into the merest sign-board painter. I beat Newbould on his own ground ! Bless us, I should soon not be fit to appear—in my works—among the dirty, tattered volumes and spotted engravings of King William and Queen Adelaide, which vary the spoutless teapots and sham bronzes of the most wretched curiosity-shop. There, I have had it

out with Newbould's effigy, and pitched into him, hot and strong, when I was at it. So now we had better forget all about the shindy, except that I should deserve ten times more on my own account, if I were such a low, time-serving beggar as to be false to what light is in me. No, no, Ellen, 'a duffer by preference'—that is my motto and last word."

The next time Ellen entered the studio, she found fresh canvas being prepared, fresh colours being ground, and Christopher, if not alert and elated, steadfast and full of high courage as he was starting to sketch in a new idea. He looked round with a merry word, "An incorrigible old dog, Ellen, will never say die; must have another hair of the dog which bit him, another shy at the unattainable. If I go on at this rate, I shall have to hire a second garret to hold my rejected addresses. Happy thought! Perhaps Curtis, as he has a leaning to high art, will take some of them in to cover his bare walls, or Louisa Fox may allow one or two to hang in the smoking-room at Brasbœuf."

Ellen retreated abruptly at the last humiliating suggestion, as he meant she should, while he was so cruel as to chuckle over her hasty exit. He was ungrateful, for Ellen had begun to sum up to herself, in an exalted frame of mind, sundry compensations for his obduracy. "Uncle Christopher has no faint heart. How resolute he is!

though he seems a simple, good-natured giant, who would take any man at his word, and be put down without the least trouble. No, indeed, he will never be put down and kicked on the head, though every painter's guild in Europe were to disclaim his pictures—not till *emigravit* is written on his tombstone also, and he has gone where the tongue of the stammerer will learn to speak plainly. Is not such constancy a mark of heroism and genius? Might not Prince Charlie have conquered England, if he had not let himself be forced into the retreat from Derby? Why, Christopher Hatherley would have shaken himself free from cowardly counsellors, and rather ridden on alone, a fearless knight-errant, though he were attended by death on the one side and the devil on the other, like Albert Dürer's brave old knight, than gone back the way he came. But it would not have been to gain an earthly kingdom—a mere material kingdom—that Uncle Christopher would have advanced with his life in his hand, or, what is surely harder, spent it, as he has spent his life, trying again, having another 'shy,' as he calls it, with boundless faith and endless patience. What is genius, if these are not among its attributes? And he has all its wealth of resource. He does not stay to water dead plants. He is not always hammering at the same piece of metal, or harping on one string. Uncle Chris is not poor in visions. He has

turned his back on the ‘Fugitives.’ I dare say he has half forgotten it by this time—he is so full of his new picture: like a later-born child of his brain, it is comforting him absolutely for the failure of the other, though he does not believe the other a real failure. Modest as he is, he believes in himself. Like every true artist, he does not need to be backed up by other men’s rash or halting testimony. He knows there was good in that picture; and he has strong hope that there will be still greater and more unmistakable excellence in the coming picture, which, within these twenty-four hours, he has painted gloriously in his imagination. God has given him the assurance. In some respects, and those the chief, after all, Christopher Hatherley is made ‘sufficient for himself;’ an adverse, indifferent, jeering world cannot for a moment shake his convictions. But will his fellow-men never acknowledge his merit? Oh, will London and the critics never give him his due, as a noble painter who deserves encouragement, a teacher of men worth listening to, if they only knew it? They would never turn from *his* canvases with praise on their lips, but dissatisfaction in their inmost hearts, a God-given sense of hollowness in the spectacle, which renders them sore in spirit, because they cannot help knowing that all the beauty, with all the power and skill which produced it, is only a handful of ashes.”

CHAPTER XIX.

AN IMPORTANT STRANGER.

A SON and heir was born to Cuthbert Hatherley and Louisa his wife. Naturally the Misses Hatherley had been acquainted with the expected event, but a bird in the hand is something different from a bird in the bush—*un fait accompli* makes a great deal more impression than a probable contingency. It had been all very well for Miss Phyllis to pooh, pooh any consequence likely to accrue to her sister-in-law from becoming the mother of future generations. Nothing was so common as children, every beggar had her brat in her arms, and poor curates' wives contrived to have half-a-dozen babies at once. There was nothing to wonder at (that Anne should show herself excited about it) in a child's making its appearance at Brasbœuf. The first nephew or niece after Ellen? Nephews and nieces were also sufficiently common, and if the world was to be believed, they did not always prove an unmitigated blessing to their credulous aunts. Very possibly the child would not live; no, no, she was

not going to take the responsibility of attempting to let Mrs. Cuthbert see how to rear it. Mrs. Cuthbert had her own sister, who would, of course, take care of her and her nurses and babies. Miss Fox might not know any better than Mrs. Cuthbert, but they could both learn. What! on the poor baby! did Anne cry in distress? Most mothers had to learn on their babies. That was the reason so many first—Anne need not put her hands over her ears with a face of horror—she, Phyllis, only meant to say that was the reason why so many first babies were specially troublesome and disagreeable. Doubtless the baby would prove a girl, and Mrs. Cuthbert would be a fine instructress and guide for a girl. She—Phyllis—would not be at all surprised, though the mother had a husband provided for the child in her cradle. The last speech was delivered with a significant look, which was almost a betrayal, at Ellen.

But when the affair happened and a son was born, even Miss Phyllis was moved. A Hatherley of another generation, a boy to hand on the old name, the future head of the house when Cuthbert should be gathered to his fathers—surely this was an event, though it had been brought about by the instrumentality of so insignificant and contemptible a person as Mrs. Cuthbert.

Certainly Louisa did not appear to think babies

so common as blackberries, for she issued, along with the announcement of the birth, the most imperative command that all the ladies at the Cottage must immediately come up to Brasbœuf, in the phaeton which was sent for them, to see their nephew.

“All the ladies at the Cottage must immediately come up.” This was a new tone to be assumed by Louisa, who had entered the family as a suppliant, seeking in vain, by much propitiation and many wiles, to win their favour. Louisa’s late motherhood, like her late wifehood, seemed to have turned her silly head. Though the excitement had spread to the Cottage, even to Miss Phyllis, it must at once be suppressed. The Misses Hatherley must remember what was due to themselves, and behave with proper dignity on the occasion. Why had not Cuthbert come and announced the birth himself to his sisters? Was he as foolish as his wife about it? Had he become a mere tool in her hands? Was he standing guard over the precious mother and child? Did he imagine that all his sisters were to get up, and go out, and take a drive on a rainy April day—it was really a pelting shower—to worship the rising sun, to pay homage to his wife and her infant? She might be a queen—Queen Victoria—or, for the ceremony was out by Victoria’s time, old Queen Charlotte, with all the world flocking to St. James’s to taste the caudle and look at the

Prince of Wales. And here was Mrs. Bellamy as foolish as the rest of them, bustling in to wish them joy. It was not such a great joy to the Misses Hatherley that the congratulations could not be deferred a little. A stop ought to be put summarily to these liberties.

The family, or a deputation from the family, at the Cottage would, of course, attend the christening when it took place, if they were required. But Sophy was not fit to be dragged abroad, at a moment's notice, like this; she, Phyllis, had been suffering from earache for the last three days, and was quite incapable of crossing the threshold. Anne or Ellen, or one of them, might go over to Brasbœuf, and hear how Mrs. Cuthbert and her baby were going on, to-morrow or next day—stay, as the phaeton had been dispatched on purpose, and was actually at the door, Anne, for Ellen was out of the way somewhere, had better drive across and make the necessary inquiries. Let them be short. Anne was on no account to stay beyond a quarter of an hour; for if Mrs. Cuthbert were worse from the visit—a quite uncalled-for, most imprudent visit, Miss Phyllis called it—though Mrs. Cuthbert herself had insisted on it—depend upon it the family at the Cottage would get the blame.

It was decidedly incautious of Phyllis to let herself be so far influenced by the binding obligation of the ponies having been taken out, and

by a keen curiosity and rising interest in what was occurring at Brasbœuf that morning, as to dispatch Anne to play politeness and spy the land. Ellen, though the news of the baby had mounted in a degree to her head also, would have been far more to be trusted.

After all, Miss Phyllis never knew the lengths to which Miss Anne was betrayed, and the enormities she committed, though the ruling spirit was aware that the envoy had been persuaded to extend her leave of absence from a quarter of an hour to three hours.

This was ample reason for Anne to come back quaking, and volubly explaining that she had been forced to stay to lunch and to drink baby's health, and Cuthbert would not have out the horses again till past three o'clock. Still Phyllis did not hear that Anne had not only kissed the child, and besought permission to hold it in her lap for five minutes, she had volunteered to kiss Louisa, and blubbered like a school-girl while she did so, as if she had been the person who had been in the wrong, so that if Caroline Fox had not interfered there is no saying what harm might not have been done. Indeed, Anne was not sure that she had not proceeded to kiss and cry over each member of the little group separately, though she had an impression that she stopped short when she arrived at Cuthbert, because he would not let her embrace him tearfully, but protested instead

in his gruff manner. What was that for? He could not tell what it was all about.

Anne also retained the knowledge, as a burden on her guilty conscience, that she had further delayed her return in driving round by Addington, to buy a far greater supply of unsuitable wool than she could ever want, because she must instantly knit something for the little darling—what she could not tell—bootikins or a vest, or a shawl—she had not the least idea which—or how to begin any of the articles of clothing, for she had not clever hands like Phyllis, and she did not dare to tell her sister what she had been about, or to ask her advice. For that matter, Phyllis thought everything in the way of a fitting present would be accomplished when she had finished a christening robe which she had condescended to begin. But as Phyllis's eyes were not so good as they had been, the robe was not likely to be completed without gigantic efforts, or to prove a success when it was done. And Anne did not know how she was to break to her sister the crushing information, which Anne had got from Mrs. Bellamy, that Caroline Fox was to give the child its christening robe, having brought it down all ready—to the very lacing in of the ribbons—from Regent Street.

In the meantime, Phyllis was prepared to feel offended with Sophy, for proposing to herringbone a square of flannel, and with Ellen for

thinking of embroidering a hood for the baby. It was enough that she, Phyllis, should work the christening robe—that achievement needed no supplement.

The difficulty ended in the gifts from the Cottage being conspicuous by their absence, in spite of poor Anne's random purchase. Even good-natured Mrs. Bellamy described it to her son Tom's wife as a "scandalous omission."

The early visits from the Cottage to Brasbœuf were strictly limited to Anne's, and to a flying call from Christopher. By the way, he went provided with a gorgeous coral and bells, and laid it down innocently, as if the child had been born, like Richard III., with all his teeth. However, coming events cast their shadows before, and the premature offering was graciously accepted. Louisa's head continued so much turned, though both doctor and nurse declared that she was making an excellent recovery, that she took everything graciously. She could not realise a ground of offence either to herself or other people—not even to the baby. She was not hurt by the aunts' delay in coming to see their nephew. They were old ladies. To be sure Ellen was not an old lady; but a girl must always be excused for finding herself engrossed with her engagements. All the same, the Misses Hatherley must be sighing and dying for a sight of their brother's boy; and how delighted

they would feel when they did see him, and found how beautifully he was thriving!

It was the young vicar who found fault, and it was with Ellen he plucked the crow. Christopher said nothing this time, possibly because he had not yet got over the warring sensations he experienced when Lina Fox held up Cuthbert and Louisa's baby for him to admire. Lina Fox, too full of her sister's well-being and happiness to think of anything else, holding up Cuthbert and Louisa's baby! How strangely and sharply the contradiction smote him!

But the vicar hailed Ellen on the subject before the young squire of Brasbœuf was twenty-four hours old. The couple had encountered each other in the church porch. For the next day was Easter Sunday, and Ellen could not fail in taking a contribution of hyacinths and the first lilies of the valley, with purple violets and scarlet pyrus, from the Cottage garden for the decoration of the church, over which she and her aunt Phyllis had been wont to preside—when the reigning queen and the queen presumptive had discorded with considerable vigour, both over general plans and details.

Alaric Curtis was eager to lay hold of the new and promising link between the two.

"Am I to wish you joy, too, Miss Ellen, or is it your turn to wish me joy?" asked the young

fellow with a beaming face, as if some great boon had been conferred on himself.

"I do not understand you," said Ellen, more in the old stiff tone than she had lately assumed to him; for a certain cordiality had sprung up between them since he had expressed his appreciation of Christopher's pictures. "Why should we wish each other joy?"

"Over our new cousin to be sure. Have you thought that he is cousin to both of us? that he makes you and me related, or at least connected? We are cousins too, in a sort of Scotch cousinship, since yesterday. I for one am greatly obliged to the little urchin. I am not a judge of babies; still I think him a splendid specimen. May I ask if that is your opinion?"

"I don't know," she answered in a kind of smiling discomfiture. "I am no judge of babies either, and I have not seen this one yet."

He started a little, and looked put out, more so than she looked; then he touched with his long fingers a branch of willow covered with catkins, which she carried among her spoils, and said in a lower graver tone, "It ought to have been an olive branch, to represent both the Brasbœuf baby and the season; for babies are called olive branches sometimes in remembrance of the psalm, while Easter still more than Christmas should be a time of peace." She drew away from him, troubled but not resentful, since Ellen

was not the person principally to blame in these last shortcomings between relatives.

All the while Louisa would not entertain the idea of shortcomings. She had conquered. How could she help conquering when a child, a son, was born to her and Cuthbert? All discords must cease. There would be perfect family union. She would never again feel lonely and rejected, haunted by a sense of the Misses Hatherleys' persistent enmity. For the enmity would be a thing of the past—evaporated, vanished before the new tie. The very first time Louisa was able to drive out again, she would go over to her sisters, taking nurse and baby in the phaeton with her, and Lina should hear how friendly and happy everybody had been. The feat was not yet performed, but Lina Fox had an instinct that, perhaps in a measure, Louisa Hatherley was not altogether in the wrong. There was a thaw in the air, and some of the frozen asperity of the Hatherleys had melted before it already.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

AS Christopher proceeded with his picture, he became possessed by it to an extent that Ellen had never remarked in him before. At first she rather liked the symptom, not being familiar with the nice French distinction between possessing your subject and being possessed by it. On all other occasions Christopher had been able to put down his subject when he quitted his attic studio, to shake himself free from its grasp as he shut the door upon it carefully, and went into the outer world for change of scene and refreshment. He had mixed with his kind in more than seeming, he had been social and sympathetic, as if no half-finished picture were calling loudly upon him, dogging his footsteps, and threatening to lay violent hands upon him at any moment, and drag him back to a service which would fast degenerate into slavery. And Ellen had been accustomed to think the elasticity and shifting character of the claims upon him highly becoming in the man Christopher, who ought

always to come before and rise above Christopher the painter, or whatever else his vocation might have been. She had believed that Christopher was healthier hearted, more whole natured, with a more rounded, harmonious, and finished individuality—nay, genius—because of this very human capacity. She knew he was far happier for it.

But in Ellen's share of Christopher's disappointments and jealousies she had begun to wonder whether the fulness of the man in him did not interfere with the success of the painter. She put the question to herself whether, if he grew narrowed and more concentrated in his nature; if all its forces were compressed into one channel and directed to one aim; if he had no soul for anything beyond his work, and were indifferent to all which did not concern it; if he became utterly intolerant of interruption and distraction—whether, in short, if he grew a cold hard egotist in entire bondage to his powers and their exercise, he might not make progress in those qualities which he lacked, and wrest from the world a tardy acknowledgment of the gift—not so much hidden under a bushel as buried beneath a load of human obligations.

He would not by any means be a better and happier man for it. Still, judging by the French proverb that a cold heart as well as a good digestion is necessary for a man's prosperity, and argu-

ing from some of the men who attained distinction in their callings, he might be a greater painter.

Christopher himself seemed now to see that the game was worth the candle, and the chance of ultimate victory warranted the sacrifice. He did not look at Ellen with the "Get thee behind me, Satan" expression in his eyes, although the increased absorption in his art to the verge of idolatry, which she was disposed to sanction, might be that falling down and worshipping of the devil, in return for which the conquest of the kingdom was promised to him, whether truly or falsely. And she was inclined to risk Christopher's goodness and happiness a little, in the remotest prospect of a triumph for him.

So Ellen thought, until she got first tired of Christopher's seclusion, then vexed with him for it, then worried, and at last alarmed by it. Before this time he had never refused to take her into his confidence. She had only to knock and say who was there, to procure admittance. He had let her see what he was about, discussing it fully with her, and suffering her to make her crude remarks.

All this was changed after the glimpse she had of the commencement of the picture, and she had hardly looked at it then. She was never let in again while it was growing under the painter's hands. Christopher had instituted a new practice. He bolted himself in when he went to

work ; he locked the door when he left off. There was not the slightest use in bringing forward the obligations of the housemaid. He could air the studio for himself, and it wanted no dusting or tidying, no scouring of the boards or rubbing up of the windows.

Christopher had taken to starting work with the lark, and not ceasing till the last minute of the lengthening May daylight. For that matter, if it had been possible, he might have gone on by candlelight, or the moon, or the morning star, since it had come to this—he could not give over painting; he was at it morning, noon, and night in spirit. He was no longer good for anything else. Ellen was forced to reflect ruefully on her uncle Chris, her old playfellow, crony, and gossip; the most human-hearted man she had ever known; the most easily and quickly interested and entertained; the readiest, in the thickest fire of jests and laughter, to advise and help. He had eyes and ears, brain and heart for nothing now save the picture which might be a myth, as nobody was allowed to set eyes on it, and he would not speak of it.

He did not behave better to other people than to Ellen. His sisters had not often intruded upon him, and for a long time they failed to notice any change in their brother. But when Mr. Curtis, whom Christopher had taken up and encouraged to come to the studio, arrived with

that intent, Christopher flatly refused to see the visitor he had formerly made welcome, would not open the door at Alaric Curtis's summons, would not so much as issue from his den to deliver briefly his apologies. Ellen felt annoyed and shocked.

This struck her as worse treatment than any which the women of the house had dealt to the vicar, at which Christopher had made so great an outcry. Fortunately, the young man only laughed, and said he had the deepest respect for the afflatus, whatever that might be; and to compare small things with great, he did not always care to be called on or called away when he was writing his sermons. One good effect of Christopher's unparalleled inhospitality and discourtesy was that Sophy, Phyllis, and Anne—all sailing in the same boat on this occasion—when they received an inkling of what had happened, while they were petrified by their brother's inconsiderate, unaccountable behaviour, saw themselves called upon to make amends, and were now more nearly friendly to their ghostly counsellor than they had yet shown themselves.

But Christopher was not sorry for his churlishness, when he ventured across the threshold, to be assailed, of course, by a storm of remonstrances and reproaches.

He scarcely listened; he did not care evidently. He was no longer able to be sorry, any more than to be glad, except about what belonged to his task.

Could this moody, *distract* man—utterly inattentive or inordinately irritable when he was spoken to—whose very physique commenced to show evil traces of such unmeasured application; his brow knit with fretting care and with unrelieved pondering; his eyes dry and bloodshot with searching straining study of one object; his hands, less muscular even within these few weeks, daubed with paints so that they could not be entirely cleansed, and shaking a little from that constant wielding of brush and mahl-stick which must defeat its end—ever recover his sweet blood, accessibility, geniality, manliness, and meekness? Or was Christopher Hatherley—the man, not the painter—about to be lost to his family and friends, when, perhaps, they should first discover the extent of the loss?

In the beginning Christopher's Birmingham days made a break in the unchanging routine which he had established, into which he had infused a burning zeal, only fit to be laid on one altar. For a time he kept to these days, though he went away so reluctantly that he no longer allowed himself a sufficient interval for his walks in the May mornings—

“ So loud with voices of the birds,
So thick with lowings of the herds.”

He lingered till he was half an hour late, and then attempted to accomplish the distance at a

trot, repeatedly missing trains—an experience well-nigh unknown to him in the old days—while he must have quitted the school, on his return, as the clock struck, rushed to the railway, caught an earlier train at the risk of his life, and managed the walk home at the same insane pace, to judge from his heated and exhausted condition when he turned in at the Cottage gate, where Ellen no longer waited for him. She was not unfaithful, but he had passed without observing her once; he had shaken her off twice; and he had looked at her several times with a jealous suspicion in his eyes, as if he accused her of watching him and spying on him.

What had come over Christopher? Ellen asked herself in misery, while she did watch for his appearance, stealthily, from the most distant corner of the garden. There was no use in bringing him a bit of hawthorn, or the first rose; he would brush it aside, or tear it to pieces, without thinking what he was about, in the inevitable pauses of bolting his silent meal. Was he at last wrapped up in his own doings beyond withdrawal? Had his many defeats gone to his brain, till they were rendering him beside himself?

It was in connection with his Birmingham days that Ellen's growing apprehensions and wretchedness about her uncle were transferred to her aunts—mainly to Phyllis. There came a Birmingham morning when for the first time, in his robust

health, since he had shouldered a portfolio, and assumed the office of a drawing-master, Christopher did not make any motion to set out on his trudge and task, though he was three-quarters instead of half an hour late.

Miss Phyllis observed the curious omission, together with some other strange symptoms, and sent Ellen to her uncle's door to tell him the hour.

"He is not going," Ellen said faintly, as she came back from her fruitless errand.

"Not going! Is he ill?" asked Phyllis, ag-grieved that anybody should take the liberty of being ill without her knowing it, without the patient's instantly applying to her for relief.

"No; at least, he says he is not. He is only busy and cannot go to Birmingham to-day."

This was worse than being ill, than being ill in concealment and in defiance of Phyllis's medical skill. This was incredible neglect of duty under her very nose.

Miss Phyllis mounted briskly to the attack. "What is the meaning of this, Chris?" she challenged her brother through the closed door, for, to her wrath, it was not thrown wide open at her first word. "Why are you not on your way to Birmingham?"

No answer.

"Christopher, do you not hear me?"

A muttered objurgation, followed by a sharp "What do you want, Phyllis? Has Ellen not

told you I am too busy to be interrupted—that I am not going to Birmingham to-day?”

Phyllis fairly stood aghast. “Do you mean to tell me, Christopher Hatherley, that after having undertaken, of your own free will, remember, to teach a public drawing-class, you are to let any private work interfere with the obligation?”

The appeal brought him out with a fevered, haggard air clinging to him, as if he had been the dishonourable trifler with binding claims which Phyllis had represented him to be. “Very well then,” he said with forced quietness and doggedness, “I will go to Birmingham and explain my position, though I shall lose my whole morning’s work—more than that, in fact, for I had just seen my way to the solution of a puzzle, and I cannot take up the riddle again at the same point at which I left off;” and he looked longingly back into the room to which he still barred the entrance, remaining standing in the doorway till Phyllis retreated, while he locked the door behind him, putting the key in his pocket like a “Blue-beard,” Phyllis said, when he came out a few minutes afterwards, ready to start for Birmingham.

“You have forgotten your portfolio, Uncle Chris.” Ellen hurried down the garden walk after him.

“Never mind, child, I shan’t require it,” he answered curtly, and she returned to the house, in

her perplexity, to find Miss Phyllis standing on the doorstep in one of her most eccentric garden bonnets, and in a mazed condition of mind.

"Explain his position! What does the man mean? Wherein does his position differ from what it was last month, last year, these dozen of years? No change has come to him that I am aware of. Indeed, there is less chance than ever, as time passes, of his making an unexpected hit. What can have put such a rash expectation into his head? I never saw Christopher so besotted before—never since, finding he could not do great things as a painter, he made up his mind to be a drawing-master—an honest shift, Ellen, but a sad downfall for a Hatherley of the Park. However, he did not seem to mind it much, but continued the cheery fellow, easy to get on with, in general—I must say that for poor old Chris—that he has always been. What new turn has he taken? I must speak seriously to him when he comes back."

Sheer culpable folly in worldly concerns was like the note of a bugle calling Phyllis to action on the opposite side of duty, diligence, and common sense. She had an earlier opportunity of taking Christopher to task than she expected. He returned by the next train. It was clear that he could have given no lesson, but only seen the heads of the school, and he announced as much at once.

"I have succeeded in making an arrangement," he said with a look of relief, as if the tension of his nerves were a little relaxed. "They have consented to let me put a fellow in Addington, whose qualifications I know, in my place for some weeks."

"But can you afford it, Chris?" remonstrated Miss Phyllis, not going about the bush. "Is it worth while for you to be at such an expense, perhaps risk your situation, in order that you may follow a will-o'-the-wisp? To be plain with you, I am afraid any likelihood of your painting a successful picture amounts to no more now. You know I am speaking in your interest, Christopher, since Cuthbert has rendered us independent of the aid you have long and faithfully given us. When it comes to that, we would none of us grudge to pay you back what you have paid, and have you here without any board—what is board between brothers and sisters?—and let you paint your eyes out if you liked—I am sure you know that, Chris?" appealed Phyllis with some tenderness. "But I think you would not like it for yourself—I judge by my own feelings."

"All right, Phyllis, I know, I know. Thank you, my dear," said Christopher hastily, with an unwonted caressing epithet, to his elder sister. "But I can afford it this once, and since the trustees are willing to spare me and suffer me to have my swing until August, there need be no

obligation," he ended a little wearily, passing his hand over his face, and walking away from his sister and the argument.

Miss Phyllis understood, and from her the news spread rapidly to Ellen and the whole family, that Christopher was going in for his final struggle with art and fortune, or Providence. He was wrestling like Jacob at Mount Penue, refusing to let the angel of achievement go till he blessed him—Christopher. On this the household of women, whatever might have been their doubt and unbelief before, united to respect the combatant and his single combat. They became impressed by it, though they could not tell what would come of it. They guarded Christopher carefully from interruption, instead of heedlessly exposing him to it, or persecuting him with remonstrances. They even went about their own occupations softly, as if noise could have troubled him.

It was only when Christopher's absorption grew by indulgence; when he remained mute and looked as if he saw nothing; when, in place of coming out to meals, or to a stroll and a pipe, he did not come out at all for two whole days and nights, but received his food handed in to him, as if he were a sentinel who dared not quit his post, and on the third day failed even to come to the door, but to all entreaties and adjurations answered only, in the voice of a man in a dream, "Presently,"

that the Misses Hatherley, with Ellen and Phyllis the nearest to distraction of all the four, became exceedingly nervous and frightened, and were on the brink of falling into despair at Christopher's extraordinary conduct. "He cannot have fainted, else we should not hear him speak, you know," suggested Miss Anne, deriving a ray of comfort from the manifest fact.

"But how long will he keep from fainting, or even continue alive, if he goes on at this rate?" cried Phyllis, who had not heard of Dr. Tanner, and was impatient in the keenness of her distress.

"It is barbarous as well as stupid of Christopher. I should not have looked for his assuming such a preposterous attitude," complained Sophy.

"Oh! never mind what we might have expected," besought Ellen, "when Uncle Chris's reason and very life may be at stake."

The women had already with one voice proposed sending for Cuthbert, and beseeching him to interfere and prevent Christopher's immolation, but each had recoiled from taking the step on her own responsibility. All had been hindered by the same suspicion that Cuthbert would come in coolly, and ask what all the disturbance was about. Christopher had shut himself up, and had not even taken his meals since yesterday. That was not a very protracted abstinence, particularly as they

heard him moving about and speaking in answer to them, so that he could neither be dead nor unconscious. A man must be allowed to judge for himself and do what he felt inclined to do. If his inclinations were nonsensical—Kit had always been an enthusiast—the worse for him. But there could be nothing better than a little starvation to bring him down from his high horse, and reduce him to attending to bodily needs. He, Cuthbert, could not take it upon him to interfere with Christopher, or any other man nearly as old as himself—he should not like such meddling for his own part. He thought his sisters and niece were frightening themselves unnecessarily, running away from their own shadows. The Misses Hatherley—especially the two energetic members of the family—shrank simultaneously from this cold bath which was certain to be administered to their excitement. Then Christopher, too, might not like such treatment; he might be angry—and Christopher fairly roused was formidable—if Cuthbert were sent for, and Christopher's weakness exposed to the matter-of-fact eyes of his brother. For the two, though on perfectly friendly terms, were uncongenial, and had not had a thought or sympathy in common, from the time they were babies.

In former days, before Cuthbert came home, when Christopher was out of the way or unavailable, the Misses Hatherleys' unfailing resort, when

a sturdy beggar refused to be dismissed without levying black mail, or a tax paper would not "come right" even to the administrative faculty of Miss Phyllis, had been the vicar. He was the natural refuge of such women, since one of them kept most of the medical practice which the family required in her own hands, and they had parted company, on the sale of the Park, with the family lawyer, whose place had never been refilled. There remained only the vicar of the parish. The Misses Hatherley had not had recourse to him lately, but their present extremity rose to such a pitch, as the day wore on to noon, and Christopher's "Presently" died away into an unintelligible mumble, that in spite of the coolness and distance which the occupants of the Cottage had maintained for more than a year towards Mr. Curtis—in spite of Alaric's cousinship to Louisa—above all, in spite of her nefarious and successful scheme, which was burnt into the memories of Ellen and Phyllis, the poor ladies, yielding to the force of old habits and instincts, did at last send along to the Vicarage their compliments, and would its master come and speak with them at his earliest convenience?

The sight of the Cottage housemaid rushing on her errand, and only stopping to explain to one or two old friends that "summat was up—she did not exactly know what—but she believed summat was terrible wrong with Mr. Christopher,

and didn't her missuses want the passon pretty bad?" proved really the most edifying spectacle which had been witnessed in Courtfield for many a day.

But the overture was made in vain, for Alaric Curtis happened to be baptizing a sick child at the other end of the parish, though his house-keeper was careful to assure the messenger that the vicar should be told of the Misses Hatherleys' request the moment he returned, and he would be at the Cottage very soon.

Mrs. Bellamy? She was only a woman like themselves, but the sisters and niece were waxing so frantic, that even another woman's company in this strait would be a comfort.

But before another emissary could be dispatched to the Park, the Brasbœuf phaeton arrived with Louisa, her nurse, and baby. Here was she come to make that first visit with the child, on which she had built such an airy castle, that she had infected Caroline with her extravagant visions, so that the sister had refused to form one of the cavalcade, lest she should break the spell.

Louisa walked in radiant, closely followed by the nurse and her charge, to find a room full of women white with anxiety and fear, and scarcely capable of seeing there was a baby in the back-ground.

"Here I am, come myself to introduce you to your nephew," began Louisa joyfully, and then

stopped with a confused perception of something altogether different from what she had anticipated. Nobody looked cold, or haughty, or indifferent; everybody was agitated—almost trembling. “What is it?” she asked abruptly, sitting down and beginning to tremble in her turn. “Is anything wrong? What ails you?”

Should they betray their own flesh and blood to the enemy? Were they brought so low as to implore her intervention with Cuthbert? The matter was taken out of Phyllis and Ellen’s hands and settled for them by Anne.

“Oh! dear Louisa, I am so glad you have come,” proclaimed the family blunderer, without a moment’s hesitation. “It is Chris. We don’t know what has come over him. He won’t come out, and he has not had a bite of breakfast, though it is luncheon-time. It is his new picture, and the smell of the oils must be so injurious on an empty stomach, while he is keeping the breakfast things standing all this time.” Anne made an extraordinary jumble of the grievance, “He never was so unreasonable before.”

“Oh! is that all?” cried Louisa, much relieved. “I will go up to him. I never let Cuthbert be late to meals. Besides, Christopher must come down when I am here with baby.”

She went away, leaving the ladies looking at each other, half indignant, half eager, that this silly little woman, who was yet of large experience

and success in the management of men, should try her skill on the unmanageable Christopher.

In the silence they heard her steps mounting the stairs, then her light confident tap at the door, and her cheerful treble voice saying, "Christopher, it is me—Louisa. I have brought over baby. You must come down immediately."

With strangely mingled feelings of gladness and vexation, the Misses Hatherley distinguished the sound of the opening of the door. But Christopher did not come down with his sister-in-law. He admitted her into the sanctuary which he had preserved inviolate for the last month. A sharp pang shot through more than one heart in the group; a burning resentment began to glow in Ellen's bosom. But before she could leave the room, snatch up her hat, and wander abroad to digest the insult she had received, and the wrong which had been done to the supreme affection of her entire young life, she was arrested by Louisa's quick return alone.

CHAPTER XXI.

VICTORY.

THE little woman came in without betraying the slightest compunction or sense of invidious, heartless trespassing on her neighbours' rights. On the contrary, her face was flushed and her eyes wet, but not with sorrow. She was actually crying with joy and triumph. "Oh! come up and see," she cried. "Christopher has painted the most beautiful picture in the world. Everybody will know that. I am so proud for him and all of you, and for myself and baby, that he should have so great an uncle." She had absolutely forgotten the baby till he entered into her calculations in the natural order of relationship. Then, to be sure, she made up for the temporary injury by an express amendment in his favour. "He was to have been named 'Cuthbert,' after his father," she announced to the startled audience. "But Cuthbert will waive his right, and won't mind, since baby must be named for the great painter and the great picture which has come into the world with him."

If Phyllis and Ellen Hatherley had stopped to think, they might not have accepted Louisa's permission, and gone on her invitation to see Christopher's picture, but they were taken aback by her wonderful tidings, which did not at once strike them as incredible, because a foolish and not a wise woman had brought them. The four Misses Hatherley—for even Sophy gathered her shawl round her and followed the rest—went in a body, as they had gone on the receipt of Cuthbert's letter announcing his return, past the neglected, indifferent baby and the nurse swelling with displeasure, without a pause, and ascended to the open door of the studio.

Christopher stood leaning against the chimney-piece of the fireless grate, and did not move. But it was not to Christopher the visitors hurried; they stepped all together breathlessly to the picture on the easel, standing before it in an unconscious awe of amazement and delight.

They were not critics, these four women—even Ellen's unripe, biassed judgment was not worth much—but they became instantly convinced that Louisa had spoken the truth. A painter of whom the world would hear had appeared in England; and that painter was the middle-aged, often beaten drawing-master, Christopher Hatherley.

The picture represented Christopher's namesake, the *S. Cristoforo*, who so often figures in old Italian pictures, in the great event of his his-

tory. There was no mistaking either the incident or the man, as had been possible enough in former pictures by Christopher. In this case, in the middle of the high ideal, there was a kind of half-divine realism. To the stooping, rough-and-rugged, great Christopher, fording the torrent with his grand, crushing burden on his shoulder, Christopher Hatherley had given, without knowing it—for he would not have been guilty of taking such a liberty advisedly—something of his own cast of countenance. But what a transparent face this painted face of Christopher's was, partly sublime, partly pathetic in its noble singleness of purpose and simplicity of character, and in the indelible ravages of human sins, cares, and sorrows which life had wrought on the fleshly mask—what a manly, honest, worn, and wistful face !

The child on the bowed shoulder, the world's Saviour bearing the tremendous burden of the world's guilt, was a true child still. But Christopher had caught a spark of the inspiration of the old masters when to baby innocence they were able to add God-like power. This infant of days, in the deep serenity of its clear eyes and soft lips, reflected the Ancient of Days in his infinite might and mercy.

The landscape background had been worked out with an incredible amount of pains and desperate devotion—for Christopher. It was not without faults, which nobody there save Christopher

himself was qualified to see, but it was not unworthy of the figures. The stormy lowering clouds and the cowering trees appeared to sob and shiver behind Christopher, but there was perfect peace in the light band of pale sky before him. The sun had long set, and the harvest moon was rising—not without pensiveness in its aspect, but it was the pensiveness of ineffable content that sorrow and sighing would flee away, death be vanquished, and the Lord God wipe all tears from all faces.

“Chris,” exclaimed Phyllis first, “I congratulate you from the bottom of my soul, my dear boy. I do more than congratulate you; I thank you with all my heart. I did not think it had been in you to paint such a picture. What fools we have been not to see it all the time!” The candid generous woman hastened to make ample reparation, to praise him and scold herself.

“Oh! Chris, why have you been so long in doing it?” demanded Anne rather disconcertingly. “And you will surely eat your breakfast now. What would you like best to have? Cook could run across to Chitterton’s and see if he has any kidneys or sweetbreads, or I’ll go down and make an omelette in no time.”

“Christopher, my father would have owned he had been mistaken if he had lived to see this day,” said Sophy, not without impressiveness.

Ellen alone had no words for Christopher’s

triumph, but she walked quickly across to him, took up his soiled, shaking hand, and kissed it in passionate homage. He drew his hand away and turned on them a face of gentle satisfaction, though it looked very weary. He was beginning to apologize. "I am afraid I have put you all about. I doubt if the game, though played but once, is worth the candle—only I wished, if possible, to win a battle, and see that for myself. I was uncertain whether I had attained my object till Louisa came in. She is an unprejudiced woman, and the Foxes had an early familiarity with good pictures. No, no, it is not a very good picture, yet it is good so far as it goes. It may live—I cannot tell. I had begun not to believe in myself. I was bent on proving, if I could, whether to paint a picture were in me; and the end may justify the means on a single occasion. It would be a ruinous mode of work for a permanency—ruinous to all the higher faculties of the worker. But at least that is a fair representation, this time, of my meaning—I do not know that I can do better than that."

It was as if Christopher, speaking wistfully, with a mixture of elation and exhaustion, were repeating the poor schoolboy's mournful doggerel:—

"Brothers, I have done my best;
I am weary, let me rest."

Louisa replied to him with the utmost conviction, "Good! it is grand, glorious! I am going away

home instantly to send Cuthbert and Lina to look at it. No, Christopher, not another day shall pass without all belonging to you knowing what manner of painter you are."

But the others gathered round her and prevented her. "You have done enough to-day, Louisa," they said with sudden anxiety on her account and friendly imperativeness. "You shall stay here, and send for Cuthbert and Miss Fox if you will. Sit here in Chris's sitter's chair till luncheon is ready."

"Sit down, Aunt Louisa," cried Ellen, observing that Louisa's delighted eyes were still straying cravingly towards the door. "I am going to fetch the child; we are all going to have a good look at the darling, and find out whom he is like. He too shall see his uncle Chris's picture before he is a day older."

How could these women's worthy hearts fail to melt in their gratitude and gladness, which were not without contrition? How could they help looking upon Louisa Hatherley as the harbinger of happiness, who, though the painting of the picture was no deed of hers, had by her ungrudging sympathy heaped coals of fire on their heads? How could the sisters and niece keep from associating Cuthbert's wife for ever afterwards with the pride and thankfulness of that hour?

The Misses Hatherley felt a little ashamed after the first minute, but the great joy of the day,

together with Louisa's unaffected willingness to accept their relenting—on which, indeed, she had come counting, though on altogether different grounds—soon extinguished the natural awkwardness, and consigned it to the limbo of oblivion.

CHAPTER XXII.

CHRISTOPHER'S LAURELS.

THESE late laurels fell thick on Christopher from the first. Alaric Curtis, having strode in alarm to the Cottage to ascertain what calamity had driven the Misses Hatherley to solicit his aid, entered on a rejoicing company, was conducted without excuse or explanation to the studio, and remained in a manner transfixed before the picture. For though he had given the painter credit for true genius, Alaric also had not imagined that it was in Mr. Christopher to paint this picture. Alaric Curtis's spontaneous words gratified Christopher more than any he had yet heard, and went to his heart, and to more hearts than Christopher's in the company.

"If I could preach one sermon like that," said the young vicar fervently, "I think I could be content to die before my time! And this is an abiding sermon," he added hastily, like a true man and Englishman shrinking from the brief betrayal of personal feeling. "In the old days when all churches which could get pictures were

✓full of them, what a boon this one would have been! And it is within the bounds of possibility that you, Mr. Christopher, would have presented it to your parish church. How proud I should have been to act as its custodian! How carefully I should have handed it down to my successor! It would have been the treasure and glory of Courtfield through future generations. What was to hinder Courtfield from becoming another Fiesole? After all, you will do better by giving it, not to your native village, but to the world."

"It will be a fresh sensation to me if it find a purchaser," said Christopher with a blunt, boyish laugh.

Cuthbert and Caroline Fox also arrived in some apprehension. Though they had been assured there was nothing wrong, they had not been told what they were wanted for. But Cuthbert took the summons in good part, while he grumbled a little at first, and called it "nonsense of Loo's," and staggered his sisters by complaining that he knew beforehand Loo would give him no peace till he came over.

The "young squire" of the Park days, the squire of Brasbœuf, who had been sacred in his family's eyes, and even treated with the utmost respect by Ellen, to have—not to say his peace disturbed, which would have been bad enough—but to be deprived of the priceless blessing of liberty by a little woman like Louisa! "Well,

if it pleased him," as Phyllis said drily afterwards, "it was his own affair."

And Cuthbert shared in the universal conversion; for the days of miracles are never ended. He was touched, in his own way, as he stood before Christopher's picture. "It is a little beyond me," he said, not without modesty; "but I believe it is the real thing at last. You have been right in your choice of a career after all."

Caroline Fox, warmly appealed to by her sister, replied almost in a tone of impatience, "Yes, yes, Loo; it is a fine, a grand picture;" but she came back again and again to look at it, when the others had strolled away to talk eagerly, well-nigh incoherently, of Christopher's coming fame and prosperity, and the changes they would bring about.

As Caroline Fox stood and looked at the picture, thinking by herself alone, large silent tears began slowly to well into her eyes and trickle down her cheeks. The sight of her tears brought Christopher from the studio door where he had been hovering. "Does anything pain you in the picture?" he asked with concern. "I thought it would please you throughout."

"It is not the picture," she answered; "it is because no one stood by you in the long fight."

"It could not be helped," he was quick to assure her, "and I was not wholly without encouragement. A man generally believes in himself,

with or without reason, perhaps the more persistently the more his neighbours distrust him. It is a kind of natural compensation. Then I had Ellen for a young ally. I should like you to know Ellen well; I think you will some day."

"I should like nothing better," she tried to reply with equal friendliness and cheerfulness. "Indeed, I tried to make her acquaintance—without success, however, first when I came back to the Park. I have not Louie's way with girls, and even Louisa——" She hesitated, with a half-smile, then added, "I fancy, from what I have heard from my cousin Alaric, as well as from my sister, that your Ellen is a little difficult to know—not always a bad sign in a girl, I hope; at least, it is a peculiarity with which I ought to have some sympathy. I am glad your niece has been a comfort to you, though she was only a child the other day."

"The other day," he repeated softly. He went on, as if by inference, though the sentences appeared to have no connection. "And Ellen is still a girl, even though she were not to go away on her own track, and leave a battered bachelor behind, in the common course of events. She is not a woman who has known and understood from the beginning."

"Not understood!" she interrupted him hastily. "I did not understand. It is but right I should tell you that I only half believed in you

after the very first. It tortured me to doubt, but I was a worldly creature, even in my poor pretence at being something higher, something of a true artist too. Now I have not painted for years, but that is nothing. I despised what you were, and what you had done, when I returned."

"Yes," he said quietly, "I know you said, 'Is that all?' But you might well say it, Lina; you had a right to protest."

"No," she said bitterly, "I had not. It was simply because I was a low-minded, arrogant, short-sighted woman; it was part of my blindness."

"Was that why you were crying just now?" he inquired again.

"No. Was I crying?"

"Yes. Why should you cry, and all the others smile?"

"I suppose because it was my mode of expressing gladness that you had conquered; that God had enabled a good and gifted man to triumph."

"Will you share the triumph?" he begged, with a glow in the eyes which had been fast growing hollow, and taking a step nearer to her.

But she drew back swiftly from him, as if she were wounded to the quick and insulted. "What! I who gave you up in your adversity? who did not believe in you, who dared to be angry with you, and to look down upon you in my wretched worldliness, not many months ago? Never, Chris-

topher! What do you take me for? Do you think I came here to make it up with you, or wished you to say that?"

But her anger passed over his head to-day. "I am not thinking of your wishes," he maintained stoutly. "I am too full of my own. You never gave me up. Don't be unjust to yourself, by way of punishing what you may consider your injustice to me. Your father interfered between us, as he had a perfect right to do, and you were bound to obey him. Besides, I could not take a step; I was fettered, bound hand and foot. Indeed, I don't know that I can do so very much now, but unless we are all flattering ourselves under a delusion, a certain amount of success is going to dawn for me."

"It is not for me to share it," she said firmly, though with quivering lips and head turned aside.

"It will not be success without you," he told her with equal determination.

"Don't talk so, Christopher. A man is a great deal younger at your age than a woman is at mine."

"We don't look like it," he said somewhat quaintly, "and you have never grown an hour older to me," which was true enough.

She seemed to pay no heed to his assurances. "You may still have the world to choose from."

"But if I choose, first and last, only and always you, Lina?"

"Nonsense," she said, with a faint smile beginning to settle on her lips, and to bring out an old dimple in her delicate cheek. "Cuthbert has already endowed Louie with his worldly goods, and one marriage is enough between the families."

"Not when your sister makes my brother happy. There cannot be too much of a good thing. But our happiness ought to have come first in order."

"No. Let me watch over your prosperity from a distance—it is all that I ask or deserve. Let me rejoice in you as an old friend who is proud of your work and happy in hearing of it—more than any other person—even than your niece Ellen, though I was too heartless and soulless to see that the greatness was there all the time, under the heavy weights and hindrances."

"Much good it would do me for you to watch me from a distance," he grumbled with a grimace. "It is you who are speaking arrant nonsense, Lina. Would it not be a great deal kinder of you to halve my crust—I promise you it will not be much more. The English public has never, that I have heard of, rushed after any art deserving the name of high, and insisted on making the artist rich. The probability is we shall be as poor as church mice. Your conscience or your pride need not be troubled. It is the only atonement you can offer, if you ever wronged me—the one thing I ask—will you refuse it to me? Some-

body said—Ellen I think it was—that nobody could refuse me anything to-day; I should get whatever I wished. I am using my privilege—a cunning dog to seize the opportunity; and will you be the one person to deny me my heart's desire, without which all else will be spoilt? Dear Lina, do you know I am dead beat? I feel as if I were worn out, as if I had used myself up in one unnatural bout. Perhaps it was wrong to put so much stress on myself. I know the pace was killing. I should not wonder although I never painted another picture."

"No, Christopher, no," she turned upon him passionately, clasping his arm tightly with her two hands, as if to keep him there by her feeble woman's strength. "You will live and work to seal my forgiveness, to enrich the people with still nobler pictures."

He stooped down and kissed her upturned face, a long kiss to image forth and atone for a long estrangement, and rested his arm on her shoulder like one who knew he had found his earthly stay.

It was marvellous how soon, from that remote nook of Courtfield, a rumour arose and spread, and was wafted to Regent's Park, and Fitzroy Square, St. John's Wood, Kensington, and Hampstead—down to bold bristling Scots in Edinburgh—across the Channel to the blustering hard-working heroes of the *Paris Salon*—away to the patient painstaking workers in Brussels, Munich, Flo-

rentine, and Roman studios—and at last beyond the Atlantic to young and old athletes among the mountains, and by the rivers of a new world, that a new painter had arisen and done a deed worth recording. So Christopher Hatherley's old associates learnt that the brief promise of his student days had been more than fulfilled. First one art straggler and then another turned up at Court-field, interviewed Christopher, saw the picture, and then tongues went wagging with renewed vigour, till one day there appeared at the Cottage a noble purchaser with a full purse, keen on native art, eager to be the first to recognise and patronise a painter who at a bound (!), it was said, had distanced all competitors, and was safe to stand thenceforth in the van of English artists. He offered such a price for "St. Christopher" as caused Phyllis to nod her head in emphatic approval, Anne and Sophy to open their eyes wide, and Mrs. Bellamy, who happened to call and to be told of the circumstance, not to believe her ears. "I declare he will be as well off as Cuthbert," she told Sam. "And only think of Caroline Fox having been within a hair's breadth of losing her chance of him by my advice!"

But Ellen was half rueful, and Caroline Fox cried again in secret, over the departure of the picture.

The most liberal terms were granted as to any future proposal of exhibiting and engraving the work. For that matter the purchaser was

bent on subjecting his purchase to the judgment of the next hanging committee of the Academy, whose predecessors had so ruthlessly condemned many of the painter's pictures—with good cause, Christopher maintained. He was awarded a place on the line in the principal room in this instance, and, as on the occasion when Etty's splendid flesh-tints burst like an unsuspected revelation on the half-astounded art-world, it was Christopher Hatherley's fate to awake one morning and find himself famous, to have commissions flow in upon him, to discover long columns in leading newspapers devoted to his honour, and eloquently crying him up to the skies.

As a signal proof of this change of fortune, Christopher received a note from John Newbould, holding out, as it were, to Christopher the right hand of equal comradeship once more, addressing him as "Dear Hatherley," and not merely congratulating him, and singling out his picture as the one deserving mention in the year's Exhibition, but dwelling on it, proving that John Newbould had not only looked for it, but had studied it, and was able to write respectfully as well as learnedly of its beauties.

Christopher made a wry face as he read.

"What is it, Uncle Chris?" inquired Ellen. "You said the note was from Mr. Newbould. Has he not done the picture justice?"

"I don't know what you call justice, Ellen,"

said Christopher a little sadly. "I only know that John Newbould cares nothing for the ideas I sought to express. I don't know whether he has not ceased to distinguish them among the crowd of other convictions which life has called up. It is only the manner of expression which he cares for. He sees that I have expressed myself tolerably this time, and he is quick to discern—I take it from long practice on his own account—the way the wind of public favour blows. Newbould has been like an incubus upon me," confessed Christopher with a sigh, "but I shall never prove an incubus to him. He ranks me with Blake, a fellow who had some curious originality and insight, but who was an inspired lunatic notwithstanding. Poor Newbould, nobody could ever have called him a duffer."

The Misses Hatherley did not by any means feel the same objections to Christopher's marrying Caroline Fox which they had entertained to Cuthbert's marrying Louisa. They were not immediately aware of the former passages between the gentleman and lady, and when the sisters were informed they proved to be too reasonable women to resent the alienation and reconciliation. Caroline Fox could not have married Christopher when he had not a penny; and as to her not anticipating the development of his genius, they were too honest to forget that they themselves had, for a long period of years,

failed to see the swan in the ugly duck in the midst of them.

Besides, Christopher's promotion would transplant him to the neighbourhood of London, and it was too late in the day for any of his sisters to be rooted up, to settle there with him. Not even Ellen could be spared now. She was wanted nearer home, so badly wanted that Ellen herself, after a spasm or two, did not grudge Uncle Chris to Caroline Fox, whom she had come to know and like exceedingly; who had been Christopher's first love, as somebody else was Ellen's; who could be more even than Ellen to Christopher as somebody else—the truth must be told, had grown to be more even than Christopher to Ellen.

The Misses Hatherley were, ere long, so thoroughly reconciled to the double connection with the Foxes, that they did not oppose, they welcomed cheerfully, as if truly there could not be too much of a good thing, and as if it were the most desirable arrangement in the world, a third bond between the families, sealed by the transference of Ellen to the Vicarage.

The ladies at the Cottage were well content to have gained a nephew, though they had lost another brother. Miss Anne was once more at ease in her conscience, in her proper element as lay-helper to her clergyman; and Miss Phyllis proved the invaluable coadjutor he had foreseen she might be. Moreover, it was noticed by Mrs.

Bellamy and others interested in the improvement, that though the aunt and niece had sometimes jarred on each other, and pulled different ways when they dwelt under one roof, Mrs. Curtis at the Vicarage—profiting by her husband's teaching, doubtless—was the first to defer gracefully and affectionately to Miss Phyllis at the Cottage. Miss Hatherley had not withheld her consent, though she had given utterance to a regret that Ellen had not inherited more of the old family beauty and "presence" to exhibit to an admiring and edified world, first as a bride and afterwards as a matron.

The Misses Hatherley were fairly well satisfied to let Christopher fly from the nest of which he had long been unconfessedly the prop, and where they remained to plume themselves on the reports of his renown, and on still more substantial tokens of his prosperity that were constantly reaching his sisters. For Caroline was as generous a sister-in-law as Louisa had always longed to be.

Ellen's marriage had broken down the last barrier between Louisa and her husband's relations. They were all ready to take her to their hearts by that time. The kind little soul, disinterested in her worldliness, and guileless in her guile, found her fit place among them.

It was in talking of the prejudice which Mrs. Cuthbert had to overcome that Christopher's wife enlightened him as to its origin.

"I could never comprehend why Phyllis and the rest of them, with Ellen head-woman in the fray, put up their backs to such an extent, to begin with, at poor Louisa," he had remarked on one occasion.

"Did they not tell you why, Chris?"

"Not they; and I don't suppose there was any why in the matter, except that they were offended by Cuthbert's taking a wife at all, and affronted to admit their selfishness."

"Honourable women!" said Caroline, not at all ironically. "No, Christopher; and they should not continue to bear all the blame, at least partly due to another offender. You ought to be told. The mere fact of Cuthbert's marrying Louie was not the offence, at least not all the offence which she committed."

"What on earth was it, then? He had money enough for both."

"You will never learn worldly wisdom, Chris," cried his wife, shaking her head; "and we, Louie and I, were brought up in a worldly school, trained to be worldly little wretches, to make calculations and study probabilities, which proud, unsophisticated gentlewomen like your sisters and niece would have disdained. I don't think it was entirely our fault," continued Caroline with some piteousness for her young self, "or that the indelicate self-seeking and coarse mercenariness went very deep."

"I cannot think what you are driving at, little woman," protested Christopher, looking in a puzzled way into his wife's grave face.

"In plain words, when Louisa and I came down to the Park the second time, we were in the same railway carriage, without knowing it, with Ellen. Poor dear Louie was chattering, as usual, to Mrs. Tom Bellamy's cousin, and her chatter unluckily took the imprudent shape of talking of Cuthbert as a good match, and proposing we should set our caps at him."

"There was no great harm in that," said Christopher with a twinkle in his eye, "only you were rather partial in your compliment to Cuthbert. I ought to have been the aggrieved person."

"Chris," said his wife severely, "can you not conceive what it was for a high-minded, single-hearted girl like Ellen to hear her uncle talked of in that fashion? To listen to a woman speaking as if she were deliberately scheming for an establishment? She set us down for a party of adventuresses."

"Just like Ellen," said Christopher, laughing. "What a fiery little Turk she was for an ailing young vicar to tame!"

"She is life and strength to him with her warm heart and dauntless energy—not that Alaric ever was a muff; but he needs a brave, cheerful woman to keep him up when his constitution is down and his nerves threaten to turn traitors. I was never

told, but I have always imagined that Ellen repeated to her aunts what she had heard, which would only have been natural."

"Then they might have set her right."

"Why, Christopher, it must have sounded as bad to them as to Ellen. They soared as far above such undesirable considerations and suggestions. Besides, I am afraid Louie did manœuvre in a simple fashion for a husband, and won Cuthbert," owned Caroline, hanging her head and blushing at the recollection. "She had been brought up to do it so far, and the example had been often enough set before her. But she did mean all the same to be a good wife to her husband, when she got him," pleaded her sister wistfully.

"She chose him instead of his choosing her—there is the whole thing in a nutshell," said Christopher. "I am sure Cuthbert was greatly obliged to her for saving him so much trouble."

"Don't laugh at what I am forced to see was a taint and blemish in my dear little Louie's womanliness," said Caroline, half angrily in her pain. "Look at the harm it worked, and there might have been no end to the evil—only, as I say, the worldliness was but skin deep, and few women are really more dutiful and affectionate than Louisa."

"I know it," said Christopher, "but as the wrong—if one can call it a wrong—has been made

right, according to Meg Merrilies' doggerel, don't you think you are exaggerating now?"

"Not a bit," maintained Caroline.

"Yes, it is unreasonable in you to expect me to look serious at this date, when Cuthbert, and Loo, and their kid are as happy as the day is long; and when the old ladies at the Cottage are as fond of them—especially of the kid—as women can be, so that if we two were not magnanimous souls at bottom, we should be as jealous as serpents. Then Curtis and Ellen have each other. Above all, it was not you who saved me or any other man trouble in choosing you for a wife. I say, why didn't you look out for a husband, Lina? Were you so pestered with suitors that you had but to point your finger at the favoured man? And if so, why did you wait for me, my darling?"

"If you have not the wit to answer that question for yourself, Chris, you need not expect me to help you."

THE END.

A A

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